

10

FRAGMENTAL
NEOTENY

ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION:
Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]





Life, land, and legacy.
All reduced to a number.

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These are the fragmental stories that turned the
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NEW YORK



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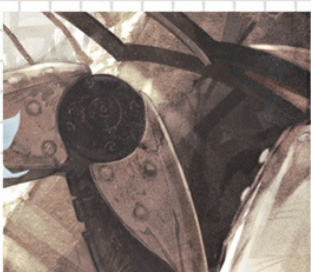
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FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY

[EIGHTY-SIX]

Life, land, and legacy.
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- Fragmental Neoteny: Pledge
- Fragmental Neoteny: Misericorde
- Fragmental Neoteny: Varlet
- Fragmental Neoteny: Brand
- Fragmental Neoteny: Undertaker
- Fragmental Neoteny: Culpa
- The Simple Days of Triage Black Tag
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- Fido
- A Kind World

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[EIGHTY-
SIX]

ASATO ASATO PRESENTS

ILLUSTRATION/SHIRABI

MECHANICAL DESIGN/I-IV

86

— Fragmental Neoteny —

Volume
TEN

86

EIGHTY-SIX

These are the fragments I've seen that turn the boy into a Reaper...



Life, land, and legacy. All reduced to a number.

[ALICE]

Captain of the first squadron Shin was assigned to. A woman with a bighearted personality. Taught Shin many valuable lessons that made him into the man he is today.



[ISUKA]

Shin's captain after he was assigned to another squadron. A sly realist, he was the one who taught Shin the most difficult lesson of all...



Countless souls were claimed.
But no deaths were recorded.

[TOUKA]

The head of the maintenance team in one of Shin's assigned squadrons. She watched over Shin's first meeting with a Scavenger that would go on to become his partner.



C H A R A C T E R S

[SAIKI]

The vice captain of a squadron in which Shin served as captain. Admired Shin as a Reaper who would never abandon his fallen comrades.



[EIJIYU]

The captain of a squadron in which Shin served as his vice captain. Attempted to think of a Personal Name for Shin, but...



Fuckin' Glory to the Spearhead Squadron!

86—EIGHTY-SIX

Vol. 10

ASATO ASATO

Translation by Roman Lempert

Cover art by Shirabii

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

86—Eighty-Six—Ep. 10

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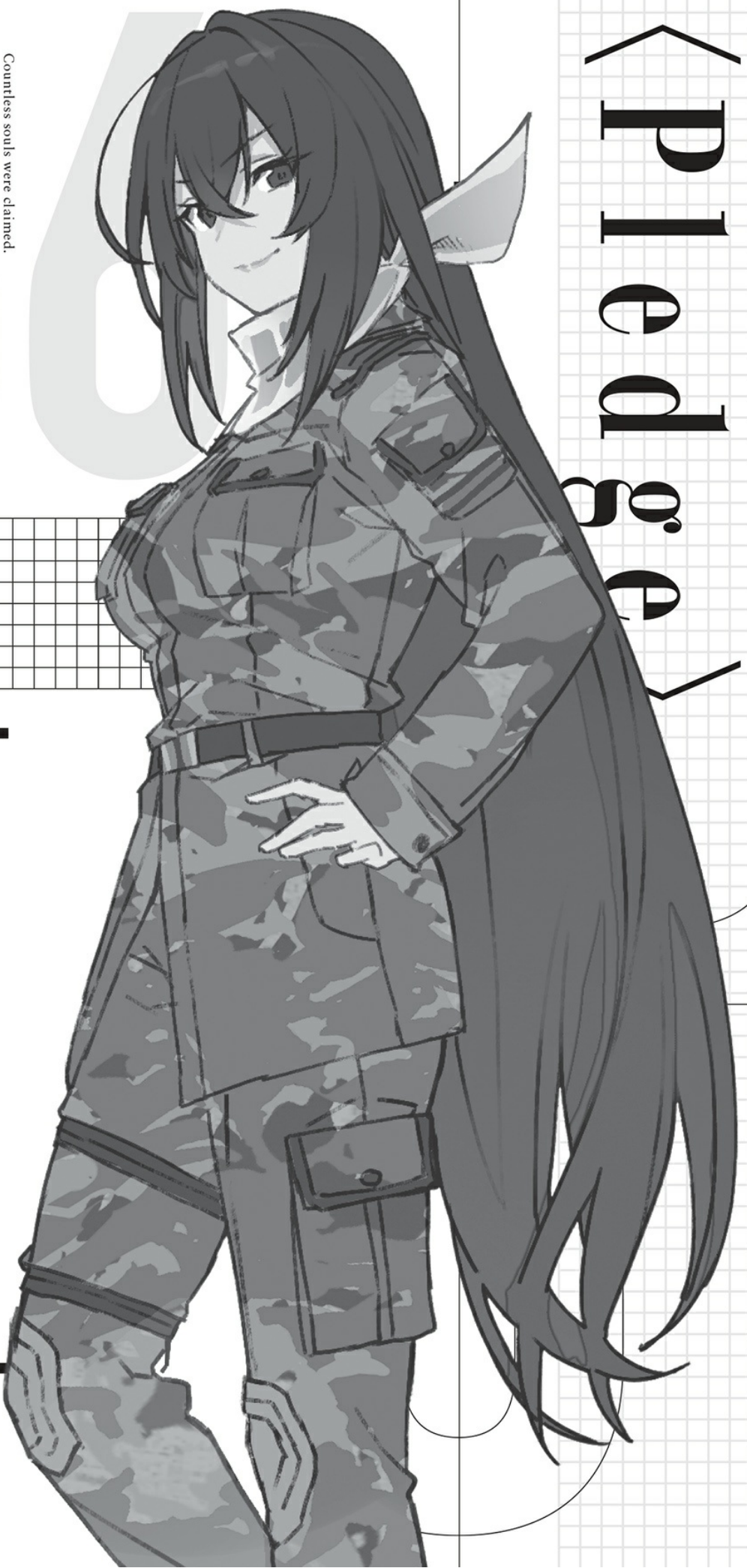
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FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY >>>

<Pledge>



Countless souls were claimed.
But no deaths were recorded.

[EIGHTY-SIX]

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into a Reaper...



CHAPTER 1

FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY: PLEDGE

6

There was no fear.

The first time he stood on the field of battle, he did not feel even the slightest twinge of terror.

Not from the intense roaring of the cannons tearing through the air. Not from the imposing form of the Löwe—that fifty-tonne, polypedal drone tank. Not from the scent of molten metal creeping into his cockpit or the constant tremors of his unit's cruising systems rumbling all the way to the pit of his stomach.

Not from the ever-present, incessant wailings.

Not from the sight of a nearby consort unit being blasted in the flank by an armor-piercing round as soon as it encountered an enemy and getting reduced to a mess of aluminum alloy, blood, and viscera.

That was his closest friend from the training facility.

Their training had lasted less than a month, but in that time, the cheerful timbre of their voice and their bright smile left a lasting impression on his mind.

It had only taken a second. The Löwe's APFSDS projectile moved with an initial velocity of 1,650 meters per second. It had hit its target before the roar of the cannon reached their ears. The acceleration propelling the depleted-uranium projectile granted it intense weight and explosive energy, and it penetrated the Juggernaut's feeble armor effortlessly. The frail human body inside it was torn apart with almost comical ease.

They likely died instantly. Before they could even fathom what had happened. At the time, he couldn't tell if that was a comfort or not.

Maybe it was the color of the crackling flames or the scent of scorched blood. Perhaps it was the smell of roasting skin wafting across the battlefield. Whichever it was, it had flipped a switch in his mind. A switch he'd never known existed, that he could never have been aware of during his short, peaceful life up until then.

The switch of his combat instincts.

He could feel the enemy's sights shift. He could tell, somehow, that the Löwe's internal automatic reloading mechanism had finished readying its next shell. By the time the barrel started rotating a moment later, he'd already pulled back the control sticks and begun moving his unit in an evasive trajectory.

The cannon roared.

The shell skimmed past him, its shock waves beating against his armor. The thin aluminum-alloy plating screeched, but even as weak as it was, this wasn't enough to rupture it. A building behind him was unfortunate enough to be caught in the crossfire. It let out a pained, rumbling cry as its concrete bowels spilled out onto the ground.

The sights of his unit—his Juggernaut—were aligned. After dodging backward diagonally, the Legion's defenseless flank stood exposed before him.

Looking ahead, the young, eleven-year-old Processor—who was once known as Shinei Nouzen when he was still regarded as a human being—pulled the trigger.

After defeating the Löwe by engaging it four-on-one as a squadron, the other team of two fledgling Juggernauts ran into another Löwe and was immediately blasted.

"Kurusu?! Oh... Oh no..."

As if looking past the curtain of powder snow and the rows of Legion, the captain of the Halberd squadron, the first defensive unit of the eastern front's thirty-fifth ward, clicked her tongue. Alice Araish.

Teito Kurusu, who had just been killed, was a promising Processor among the fledglings who'd been thrown into the field of battle with insufficient training. He caught on quick, had grit and courage, and was capable of making clear, cogent judgment calls. He served as something of a leader among the younger Processors.

Alice had hoped he would at least be able to function in the rear in a suppressive fire position. But she was mistaken. Even in a situation where the squadron was understaffed and below its full capacity of twenty-four members, she shouldn't have paired the fledglings together.

The Legion outperformed them in all fields, and battling them was always a herculean task. It was said that only one in a thousand Processors survived their first year of service. That was the kind of hell they were cast into.

The other surviving Juggernaut couldn't move. Thinking of the mature, silent boy sitting in that Juggernaut's cockpit made Alice grit her teeth bitterly. This child soldier was the same age as Teito, but he was very much his opposite—a boy, small even among his peers. Some cold part of her mind suspected he wouldn't survive for long anyway.

His Juggernaut remained still. With her perception of time slowed down and stretched by the adrenaline pumping through her veins, Alice watched on as it stood, seemingly cowering in the face of the machine that had ruthlessly murdered his partner.

There were no consort units nearby to help him. And though she wanted to come to his aid, Alice herself was surrounded by a swarm of enemies.

It was too late. Nothing would help. And despite knowing this, she called out:
“Nouzen! Get awa—”

But just then, his Juggernaut moved.

5

The 57 mm tank shell accurately hit the back of the Löwe's turret...and was deflected in a spectacularly anticlimactic fashion.

“...No good,” Shin whispered as he looked at the footage on his optical screen.

The armor around the tank’s turret was especially thick. He’d been taught as much, but apparently, the Juggernaut’s main armament couldn’t even reliably penetrate the relatively thin armor at the back of the turret.

The Löwe’s optical sensor and the sights of its cannon swerved toward him. Seeing this, Shin switched over to his secondary armament, a pair of 12.7 mm heavy machine guns...which of course were of no use, either. But upon sustaining damage to one of its sensors, the Löwe froze up for a second, allowing Shin the time he needed to evacuate its line of fire.

The heavy machine gun sitting on the Löwe’s turret revolved to chase him. Unlike the Löwe, the Juggernaut’s frontal armor couldn’t even block heavy-machine-gun rounds. Shin retreated to avoid the barrage. He then strafed horizontally, avoiding a shell from its 120 mm cannon.

Shin paused, taking a single, sharp breath. The machine guns were useless. They lacked the necessary firepower to deal any damage, at least against a Löwe. In terms of its operation speed, the Juggernaut’s reaction time was sluggish. It was a hastily built weapon that was slow to jump and rotate, and it didn’t even have a proper lock-on system.

Right now, it was impossible for him to cut around the enemy and assume a position where he could aim at the top of its turret—or at its back, which had relatively thin armor. Looking at the enemy unit’s giant, imposing form made Shin’s mature, bloodred gaze turn cold. His eyes somehow took on the same artificial, heartless chill of the Löwe’s optical sensor.

In that case...

When he dodged the Löwe’s first cannon shot, Alice thought it was just a stroke of luck or a coincidence. But when he dodged a barrage from its heavy machine gun and a second cannon shell, she had to admit it couldn’t have just been luck.

Despite technically being a Feldreiß, an advanced polypedal weapon, the Juggernaut’s mobility was low. And so Shin’s unit dodged the Löwe with slow, sluggish movements. He then began barreling toward it.

Upon realizing what he was thinking, Alice couldn't help but shudder with terror. The Juggernaut's 57 mm cannon was too weak. It could perhaps handle lightly armored Legion types like the Scout-type Ameise or the Dragoon-type Grauwolf, but a heavyweight target like the Tank-type Löwe was another matter altogether. The Juggernaut's main armament couldn't damage its frontal armor, and depending on the distance, even its rear armor was too tough for the shell to penetrate.

But if he was to close in on it, he'd maintain his shell's kinetic energy upon impact by minimizing the distance it had to travel. Theoretically, it made sense. But a Löwe had a high-firepower 120 mm tank turret, 650 mm pressurized steel plates, and the absurd maneuverability shared by most Legion units. Challenging this kind of unit in close-range combat on his own felt like an act of suicide.

Especially considering he was a child soldier who'd only stepped onto the battlefield for the first time that day.

The Löwe changed its bearing. The fifty-tonne massive machine silently barreled forward, as if mocking the clumsy Juggernaut for its cheeky attempt at defiance. The Legion were graced with high-performance actuators and shock absorbers that muffled their movements. Jumping from a static stance to its top speed in the blink of an eye, the Legion unit closed in on the Juggernaut.

The Tank type brandished its stake-like leg, trying to stomp out the insolent insect in its way, just as Shin's Juggernaut fired a wire anchor into the ground diagonally in front of it.

Reeling the wire in, the Juggernaut skidded along the ground, weaving past the kick aimed at it and sliding into the Löwe's backside.

And then he fired his cannon. At point-blank range.

This time, he aimed at the back of the fuselage—an area that was thinly armored compared with the turret. And he fired at a short distance that a tank turret wouldn't normally be in, with timing too precise for the enemy to dodge.

The APFSDS shell hit its target, finally penetrating the armor. It destroyed the Löwe's internal mechanism, causing the metallic giant to burst into flames. A moment later, the fuse on its depleted-uranium core went off. That made the

ammunition within the Löwe's turret erupt in a series of induced explosions, splintering the cannon with a spectacular blast.

“What...?!” She heard one of her squad mates exclaim in surprise through the Sensory Resonance.

She couldn't blame them. Alice herself could only stare at the sight in disbelief. The other Legion, despite being murder machines wired only for slaughter, also seemed to freeze up, like they couldn't comprehend what had just happened.

Black flames billowed out of the Löwe's metallic form, melting the snow around them. The light of those flames cast a crimson shadow over the Juggernaut's armor as it stood motionlessly. It was a brand-new unit, its plating still a light-brown shade.

It was like an ominous skeleton, crawling across the battlefield in search of its lost head.

4

Five years ago, the war with the autonomous combat drones known as the Legion broke out. And when it did, Alice, and those like her, ceased to be human.



Illustration: I-IV

*

Their homeland, the Republic of San Magnolia, was mainly populated by silver-eyed, silver-haired Alba. Apparently, that was the reasoning behind it. Alice didn't really understand. Either way, Alice and her sort were driven out of the safety of the eighty-five administrative Sectors and their fortress walls. Exiled from that paradise made only for Alba—for humans.

And they were cast out into the nonexistent Eighty-Sixth Sector. They were forced to live in internment camps and on the battlefield as pigs in human form—as Eighty-Six.

Benevolence being one of its national policies, the Republic didn't see fit to send its civilians out onto the field of battle. And despite that, they failed to develop a drone that could match the Legion's power. Their national defense and their ideals clashed, but they soon found an all-too-simple solution.

The Eighty-Six didn't count as human, and any piloted machine they were inside wasn't considered a manned unit, but a drone.

And so, the manned combat drone, the Juggernaut, was born. The Eighty-Six were loaded onto them as "Processors." The Juggernaut was lauded by the Republic as a cutting-edge, humanitarian weapon that created a battlefield of zero casualties. And even now, Alice and her fellow Eighty-Six put their lives on the line every day to fight the Legion.

The Eighty-Six, Processors and otherwise, were all fairly young. Over the first few years of fighting, most of the adult Eighty-Six had passed away, leaving only children.

Alice looked around her unit of child soldiers. Being seventeen years old, she was among the oldest here. They were in the eastern front's frontline base, separated by a hundred kilometers and antipersonnel, anti-tank minefields from the Gran Mur's fortress walls. Within their barracks, a building faded by exposure to the sunlight and rain, they gathered inside a meeting room adjacent to the hangar.

"Good work today, everyone... As unfortunate as it is, I can't say we got through today without any losses, but you all put up a hell of a fight."

Long, straight black hair. Dark, oblique eyes. Alice stood in the meeting room, her battle-tempered figure filling out her camouflage uniform. She was a Processor in her third year of service. A sky-blue scarf was tied around her neck, accentuating her effortless beauty.

She set her gaze on a corner of the room, curling her pale, unadorned lips.

“...Shinei Nouzen. You, of all people, sleeping during *my* briefing? You’ve got some nerve.”

At her scolding, a small figure who was nodding off on a pipe chair in the back of the room jolted upright. He gazed up at her with his distinctive bloodred eyes in a youthful gesture that fit his young age. His hair was an even darker shade of black than Alice’s, contrasting the fair, marble-like features of his face. She looked down at his neck, her eyes resting on the unpleasant sight of bandages sticking out from under his collar.

“I’m sorry.”

His voice was a bit high-pitched. It hadn’t deepened yet. Its tone completely sapped her of any intent she might have had to scold him any longer, which only made her sarcastic smile widen. Something about him reminded her of a family member—someone whose voice would forever remain high-pitched and unbroken.

“Well, that’s fine. Today was your first battle, so you must be tired... We’re all just drone parts in the end. Pigs like us can imitate the *glorious* Republic soldiers however much we want, but it’d be little more than a farce.”

Being a drone, the Juggernaut showed little regard for its inhuman Processors. Its cockpit was cramped. Its Bakelite seat was so uncomfortable and hard that it almost felt like an affront to ergonomics. And the thin aluminum plates that served as its excuse for armor did little to spare its pilots from the residual heat of the power packs or the intense vibrations of its four legs.

Humans could adapt to just about anything, but riding the Juggernauts for the first few times was extremely taxing on the fledglings, with their underdeveloped, prepubescent bodies. Combat maneuvers made their limbs ache, rendering many of the children incapable of fighting any longer, which consequently ended with them being disposed of. And all this was exacerbated

by the absurd intensity of the battles they were forced to march into.

“Well, I’m sure plenty of us are about ready to pass out, so today’s briefing ends here... Nouzen, you’re free to go to sleep; just make sure you get back to your room first.”

Alice’s lighthearted banter allowed the surviving squad mates to let out their first chuckle in quite some time. Some of the fledglings who’d been forced to watch their friends die still had slightly stiff expressions, but they did curl their lips up a bit.

But even among them, she saw the red-eyed boy keep his head lowered, without so much as a ripple of emotion in his expression. This concerned her.

“Can I ask you something, Alice? Captain?”

Though the base was mostly occupied by teenage boys and girls, the Juggernaut maintenance crews were the exception to that rule. Most of them were over twenty years old. Many of them were former soldiers who remained on the battlefield or injured Eighty-Six who were relegated to maintenance work instead. Unlike the Processors, who were by and large expendable and replaceable, professional maintenance knowledge was seen as essential and valuable. And so even Eighty-Six who couldn’t keep on fighting weren’t quite so easily disposed of.

“About this rig. The one riding it was a squirt on his first battle, right? Can I ask what kind of stunts the little kid pulled to mess up the suspension system this badly after just one fight?”

Guren, the chief of maintenance, asked this of Alice with a sour expression as he rested his hands against a standby Juggernaut. He was a red-haired young man, seven years her elder.

He’d served for three years as a mechanic for the thirty-fifth ward’s first defensive unit. He knew how savage the fighting could be here, and if he was making that expression, the unit must really have been in poor condition.

“Was it that bad?”

“The actuator’s in shambles. No point in even fixing it; we’ll have to switch the whole thing out,” he said, and then he directed his blue eyes at her, as if

pressing her for an answer to his question.

“Well, believe it or not, he went head-to-head with a Löwe,” she said.

Guren’s mouth fell open.

“...Seriously?”

“Yep. And he brought it down all on his own. His engine malfunctioned after that, so we had to cover for him, though... But it was his first battle. A fledgling—and such a small one at that. Gives me the creeps.”

Her exasperation was natural. Most fledglings on their first battle were lucky if they didn’t end up shooting a comrade by mistake. And with the Eighty-Sixth Sector’s high mortality rate, most of them were likely to lose their lunches in the best-case scenario and their lives in the worst. Just coming back alive was a job well done for the fledglings.

The performance gap between the average Legion unit and the Juggernaut was simply that vast. The Giadian Empire had been a technological giant and a military superpower, and they’d built the Legion while outfitting them with the most advanced technology and combat ferocity they could muster. By comparison, the Juggernaut was a faulty piece of junk.

Its firepower was poor, its armor was feeble, and its limited mobility didn’t allow it to even jump properly. Its build was beyond reckless; it was a weapon meant to bury the expendable Eighty-Six, with its only merit being its ability to shoot at all.

Even fighting the lightweight Grauwolf types was a challenge for the Juggernaut. So facing off against a Löwe, the central unit and symbol of the Legion’s offensive strength, was absurd... Even Alice, who was becoming a veteran, wasn’t sure if she could reliably do that.

“I’ll admit I was wrong about that one. Most kids like him don’t usually live long, but...”

She had been seeing more and more of those kinds of kids coming in among the fledglings. Kids who seemed to be missing something vital. Who seemed to have killed their emotions and developed an indifference to everything around them. Children who avoided interaction.

Such children were the first to die in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. They failed to get their comrades to cover for them and seemed to have a disregard for their own survival. In most cases, they didn't survive their first battle. And even if they survived the first one...they didn't return from the second.

Alice couldn't blame them for becoming that way, of course. When the war started, and she was sent to the internment camps with the rest of the Eighty-Six, Alice had been thirteen years old. She had some understanding of the world around her and had developed her own sense of self by that point.

But kids like Shin had only been seven or eight years old at the time. They had guns suddenly forced against their heads and were marched into internment camps that were surrounded by minefields and barbed wire, where they were forced to live like livestock. Within two years, they lost their parents, grandparents, and siblings... No child could endure so much and come out mentally unscathed.

Shin had it worse, though. He clearly had noble Imperial blood running through his veins—linking him to the same Empire that had created the Legion in the first place. People like him were blamed for the war and hated in the internment camps. It was the kind of bloodline that was bound to attract severe discrimination.

The Eighty-Six were subjected to discrimination, but they weren't necessarily innocent victims. The world always had a way of being coldest to the outnumbered and the weak.

"...So that kid, Shin, was it?" Guren snorted. "You should look after him."

That comment made Alice blink in a bewildered fashion.

"Well...I'm his squad captain, so of course I will. But why?"

Guren looked away from her, fixing his gaze on the Juggernaut in front of him.

"I can't exactly see it that clearly, but...I think he's scared of the older kids. Kids about your age. They're all taller, and their voices are deeper..."

"...?"

Apparently, Guren had the supernatural ability to "see" people's emotions.

He supposedly inherited it from his red-haired father's bloodline, and it manifested rather faintly in him. But his ability to read others' feelings had been a boon to Alice in the past. She wasn't going to doubt him now.

"But thankfully, you're a woman. It doesn't look like he's afraid of you yet. So I figured I should tell you."

"Well, did...did some men do something to him in the camp's training facility? Did they...beat him or something?"

Any concept of public order had long since crumbled away inside the internment camps, and all the Republic soldiers who interacted with the Eighty-Six—be it in the training facilities, during transportation, or when commanding them in battle—were total scum, to put it mildly.

"Well, I didn't see anything like that, so I don't know, but...I bet there's a story behind what happened to his neck. There's an emotion coiled around his throat...like a collar, or a chain, choking him beneath those bandages."

"..."

All Processors had RAID Devices set into the back of their necks for the Para-RAID. It was indispensable for surviving in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, but the way the Republic implanted them was pretty rough and painful.

The quasi-nerve crystal was embedded under the skin, but there were rare cases where Processors took damage to their spines, resulting in paralysis. These Processors were removed, of course. And the whole procedure was done without anesthetic or any disinfectant, so the wound left in the wake of that accident wouldn't always necessarily heal.

Alice had always assumed Shin wore the bandages around his neck because the wound from the implant hadn't healed yet, but apparently, that wasn't the case...?

"...Understood. I'll watch out for him."

3

The next day, Alice immediately found herself in a concerning situation with

regards to the boy.

“—took my eyes off him for two seconds, and he ran off somewhere. Hell, who knows, maybe Nouzen walked off on his own...”

When Shin’s squad captain came to her after patrol, telling her with a pale face that Shin’s Juggernaut had gone missing, Alice shook her head in an attempt to stave off the incoming migraine.

Thanks to the Legion’s powerful jamming units, the Eintagsfliege, both radar and radio transmissions were completely ineffective. And to avoid any surprise attacks, the Processors had to continually patrol the combat area. Sometimes, they’d run into Legion advance units, which could escalate into full-blown battles. This made these patrols into stressful routine work for all the squadrons.

And in the middle of one such nerve-racking patrol, the youngest fledgling in the squadron had gone missing.

“...Roger that. I’ll have my platoon look for him. Have the rest of the platoons keep up their patrol.”

Thankfully, she found the little troublemaker before long.

“—Nouzen.”

Upon hearing her voice, Shin, who was standing still over a pile of snow-covered wreckage, turned to look at her.

The Republic’s military had been wiped out by the Legion within the first two weeks of the war, forcing the Republic’s citizens to abandon the vast majority of their territory and shut themselves off behind fortress walls. As such, the city ruins that made up the battlefields of the Eighty-Sixth sector were devoid of any human presence...

...with the exception of the inhuman Eighty-Six.

Alice made her Juggernaut kneel, and then she walked over to him with a bitter smile. Why did she ever think he was mature and docile? Looking at him now, it was clear he was quite a rambunctious boy.

“I was wondering what came over you when you disappeared in the middle of

patrol... You never know where the Legion might be lying in wait. Don't go off on your own again."

Even a Löwe, with its fifty-tonne weight, could move around without making a sound. There were cases of Processors failing to notice Legion that had snuck up on them until they were face-to-face with the mechanical monstrosities.

"And walking around the battlefield outside your unit... You'd be dead in a heartbeat if a self-propelled mine found you."

"I'm sorry... But there aren't any Legion in the area right now."

Alice paused, staring at the boy in confusion. He sounded oddly confident about that. Shin climbed down from the small mountain of rubble and reinforced concrete. He approached her, his footsteps muffled despite the hard soles of his combat boots. The barrel of a 7.62 mm assault rifle was strapped onto his shoulder, the gun clearly too large in proportion to his small physique.

"So what were you doing here?" Alice asked.

When she found him, he was squatting down on the mound of concrete, seemingly looking for something. Once he heard her question, his bloodred eyes seemed to sink a bit.

"...I wanted to look for something of Teito's."

His answer rendered Alice momentarily speechless.

"His corpse is probably gone, so I looked for a piece of his unit... At least, that's what I thought I should do."

Shin turned his gaze to the city ruins' main street, but aside from the burn marks that lingered on the asphalt, there was nothing left. Not Teito's ruined Juggernaut nor the Löwe that Shin took down. Not even the three lightweight units his consorts later destroyed. Not so much as a fragment remained of any of them.

"...The Legion have specialized units that collect wreckage... The Tausendfüßler. They can clean away the remains of a battle that size in less than a night."

They took everything they could find without discrimination. Be it friend or

foe. The ruins of destroyed units, shell fragments, vehicles, and aircraft in abandoned military bases. They greedily collected it all and carried it to the underbelly of the Weisel nestled deep within the Legion's territories. The Weisel themselves were giant, autonomous factories that devoured that wreckage and used them to build more Legion, which they rolled out as quickly as the black smoke rising from their exhaust pipes.

All to destroy their designated enemy: any and all humans who weren't part of the empire that created them.

The Republic's frontline bases actually had autonomous units that performed much the same role. These bases had small production and automatic plants, making them self-sufficient even on the battlefield. Of course, the lofty humans refused to leave the safety of their walls, meaning they needed some kind of automatic feeding system to feed the Eighty-Six.

So for all Alice knew, Teito's unit might already be in their base's recycling furnace...but she didn't tell him that. Telling someone their Juggernaut used spare parts from the wreckage of a dead friend's unit could give them the feeling they were cannibalizing their comrades. And that was a brutal truth Shin did not need to face... At least, not yet.

Either way, Alice smiled at him. She really had misjudged this kid. His expressions and emotions might be dim. He did appear detached from what went on around him, and the way he seemed to avoid looking her in the eye spoke to his tendency to avoid personal interaction.

But he wasn't completely indifferent to those around him. Quite the contrary, in fact.

"...You're sweet. You wanted something to remember him by, didn't you?"

Had he found himself on an unforgiving battlefield, where death lurked around every corner, for this reason alone? But Shin gently shook his head.

"I wanted to warn him, but I couldn't."

A faint trace of emotion flickered behind his bloodred eyes. Self-condemnation...?

"It was the first time a Legion unit was that close to me, so I didn't think

they'd move that fast. But I could tell it was close by. So I could have warned him...and because I wasn't careful, he—”

Alice reached out to the boy, plopping her hand on his head. Alice was tall, and Shin was still small. The height gap between them was quite significant. With his words cut off, Shin stiffened in surprise and looked up at her. Alice looked back at him and said:

“Anyone who needs other people to warn them in these kinds of situations is as good as dead.”

Those words were grim and cold. She continued, gazing into the boy's crimson eyes as he slowly widened them.

“This is the kind of battlefield we're in. If you don't try to protect yourself, you'll die eventually. And we won't always be there to babysit people who can't do that.”

The Juggernaut's firepower was feeble, and its primary strategy involved multiple units working in tandem to fire at the enemy's flank and rear, where their armor was at its thinnest. Comrades had to work together to survive in this battlefield. But in the end, it was each person's responsibility to protect their own life.

There were times when one was stranded in the middle of battle. When one's consort units couldn't offer any support. And when one's squad mates were all...wiped out. Cases like that happened all the time. And people who needed others to cover for them didn't usually survive in those sorts of situations. And the responsibility for their deaths didn't lie with those who couldn't protect them.

“So don't let what happened to Teito weigh on you. It's not your fault... If anything, I think he was happy to have a friend like you by his side at the very end.”

“ ... ”

“So remember him... That's the biggest tribute you can make for him.”

And the one and only tribute one can make for another on this battlefield.

“...I will.”

“If anyone’s at fault for what happened, it’s me, the captain... I’m sorry.”

Shin shook his head gently once more. Alice smiled at seeing his curt gesture and patted his black hair again. He was a kind boy after all. Too kind for this ruthless world. But it only took a moment for Shin to look up at her with displeasure... Apparently, he wasn’t too happy about being treated like a child.

Alice let go of him, and he walked a few steps away before turning his eyes to her again.

“Captain Araish—”

“Call me Alice. My rank doesn’t mean anything anyway.”

For the sake of clarifying the chain of command, Processors were uniformly allotted ranks. But since they weren’t treated any better or paid salaries accordingly, the ranks were nominal at best.

“...Why are you here, Captain?”

Calling an older person by their first name was a bridge too far for him, it seemed.

“Oh, same reason as you... I thought Teito might have left something behind, so I came to see if there’s anything to pick up.”

Her real reason was that she’d come to look for a little prankster who’d up and disappeared in the middle of patrol—but she left that unsaid.

Shin cocked his head. Alice herself had just said that the Tausendfüßler collected pieces of the Juggernaut’s wreckage. He probably didn’t understand why she’d come here for Teito’s things if she knew that.

“Right, I didn’t tell you fledglings about that yet... Well, I’ll explain when we return to base. You left your partner over there. Get in and let’s head back.”

Shin’s Juggernaut was crouched behind some rubble, looking terribly abandoned.

“These are the grave markers for the ones who died yesterday. Teito Kurusu, Atori Laishi, Nana Ouka, and Amala Kii.”

Before her squad mates—whose number had dwindled to fourteen following the previous day’s casualties—Alice held up something for the group to see. Small metal shards, only a few centimeters in size, with each of their names carved onto them. Splintered pieces they happened to find, which had the name etched into them with a nail. Rather crude, as grave markers go.

The Republic citizens inside the walls would likely break out laughing at this comical excuse for a grave marker. But none of the boys and girls in this room laughed. Fourteen pairs of eyes, each with their own unique shade, gazed sincerely and gravely at these metal fragments.

They were the sole salvation one could hope for in the battlefield they’d been imprisoned in.

“We Eighty-Six don’t get graves. Our names have been struck out of every record, and we won’t leave any corpses behind anyway. So these are our grave markers. We etch the names of those who died, and someday, our names will go down like this, too... This is proof that we existed.”

Even if these small fragments of proof will simply rust away somewhere on the battlefield, with no one to mourn or even see them. Even if the wind and the sand will one day wear them down until they’re gone, nowhere to be found.

“Let’s make a promise, everyone. We’ll carve the names of those who died on their units’ fragments and have the ones who survive carry them. That way, the ones who survive until the very end can bring everyone else along with them to their final destination.”

In a battlefield such as the Eighty-Sixth Sector, which had been dominated by the Legion, a fragment of one’s Juggernaut or a piece of metal or wood was the most one could hope for.

“Let’s remember the comrades who fought alongside us. If even for just a moment.”

Alice had spent three years fighting in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, where a Processor’s yearly survival rate was less than 0.1 percent. And everyone who’d fought with her during that time was gone by now.

Everyone in this unit would likely leave her behind, too.

She gazed into the clear, crimson eyes looking up at her from the pipe chair in the corner of the back row and smiled.

He was just like her younger brother, who'd died from disease in the internment camp. Had he still been alive, he'd likely be as old as him. But he'd never gotten to that age.

"I'll take all of you with me when the time comes. So you...have nothing to fear."

2

"Shit." She heard someone's voiced panic through the Para-RAID. And less than a moment later, she saw Shin's Juggernaut engulfed in a cloud of black sediment. Something had shot down from the sky, piercing the earth with an explosive shock wave and throwing a massive amount of sediment into the air.

The force of that black tidal wave sent the lightweight Juggernaut flying, and Shin was helplessly blown away along with his unit.

Shin's bloodred eyes opened. He blinked twice, then a third time, and craned his head to look around. It was clear he didn't grasp the situation he was in. As she sat beside his cramped, simple pipe bed and watched over him, Alice pondered that it only made sense he'd react this way. She snapped the hardcover book in her hands shut and called out to him.

"You awake, Nouzen?"

"...Captain."

He replied with a raspy voice, but his tone and gaze were thankfully lucid. Apparently, he didn't take any fatal damage to his brain. He placed a hand on his faded sheets and pushed himself up. Recognizing that he was in his room in the old, prefab barracks, he turned to her with an apprehensive gaze.

"...Why?"

"Yeah, I'd figured you wouldn't remember. The Legion's long-distance units... The Skorpion types' bombardment blew you away, and you fainted. The Legion employ artillery support from their back lines when they retreat. They haven't

been mobilized ever since you joined, but...apparently, they're active now. So now you know that even if the Legion start falling back, you can't afford to be careless."

The Skorpion types were the Legion's artillery units, armed with 155 mm projectile cannons. They always stayed hidden deep within the Legion's territories, and Alice had never actually seen one. After all...

"Skorpion types have a range of thirty to forty *kilometers*. They're well outside the Juggernaut's detection range. We don't know if they're there until they start shooting."

Modern weaponry has an astoundingly wide range. Even a short tank turret meant for close-range engagements can fire two kilometers in any direction, and depending on the type of ammunition used, a Howitzer can hit a target as far as forty kilometers away.

An attack that reaches from far outside the range of what one can see on the surface. From a range one inexperienced with combat can't even begin to imagine.

Alice and the Eighty-Six weren't given an artillery weapon with an equal range, so if a Skorpion appeared, it was always outside the range of their Juggernauts' 57 mm cannon, and they were helpless in the face of the enemy's bombardment.

"And you can't tell...?" Shin asked.

"Well, based on how many Ameise are around, we can probably hazard a guess."

The Legion couldn't see forty kilometers ahead, either. Even the most advanced optical sensor couldn't detect something hidden far beyond the horizon. Since the long-distance units couldn't confirm their trajectories or align their sights on their own, they required the aid of Observer Units deployed near the bombardment site.

"..."

But this was a bit too much for a newcomer to the battlefield to understand. Shin fell into a pensive, seemingly confused silence.

“Either way, I’m glad you’re okay... Or that’s what I’d normally say, but...”

Shin looked up into Alice’s eyes, and she examined his features in turn. His cheeks still had the round contours of an infant, and he had white bandages just above his brow and around his slender arms. And there were other bruises and lacerations all over his body, too many to cover.

“You’re being too reckless... How many times do I have to tell you? Stop trying to fight the Legion by yourself.”

All his injuries were fresh from today’s battle. Some of them were from when he was blown back by the Skorpion fire, but he got most of them before that happened.

He’d closed in too much on a Grauwolf and evaded one of its high-frequency blades. And while he did avoid a direct hit, the blade still skimmed against his cockpit block and shattered an optical screen. Its fragments went flying around the cockpit block and rained all over him.

It’d been a month since Shin was stationed in her squadron. And while he single-handedly put in the kind of work one would never expect from a fledgling, he regularly broke formation during battles and challenged the Legion all on his own. His actions were absurdly dangerous.

Alice could only sigh nervously. She had to scold him about that during every single debriefing session, but he never listened.

“We fight the Legion as coordinated units. Here in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, there’s no need for glory. No one cares if you get the first kill or if you beat an enemy one-on-one. Recklessness is tantamount to suicide. Cooperate with your squad mates.”

“...If I disturb the Legion’s lines, it’ll give my squad mates openings to exploit.”

“Maybe it will, but those aren’t stunts you can pull off in that walking coffin.”

The Juggernaut’s aluminum-alloy armor was too thin and flimsy. Even its sturdiest part, the frontal armor, couldn’t withstand machine-gun fire. In the end, all they could do was dodge the Legion’s attacks, but the Juggernaut’s mobility was far inferior to theirs. So while they might have been able to avoid attacks from a safe distance, they wouldn’t be able to dodge any more in melee

range if the enemy had them in their sights.

“But—” Shin tried to press the argument with uncharacteristic persistence.

“Nouzen,” Alice cut him off with a low voice.

Apparently, this was one hill he was willing to die on. And he likely did it out of a genuine desire to protect his squad mates. But Alice wasn’t willing to budge on this, either. Not ever.

“That’s enough. I don’t want any of my squad mates to have to live with the guilt of having a friend die so they could survive.”

The shame and cowardice of living on because someone sacrificed themselves for you. And Alice hadn’t lost her pride yet. She wasn’t the kind of shameful person who’d let the youngest fledgling take the fall for her.

“Or are you actually trying to kill yourself? Because let me tell you right now, there’s no place in my unit for—”

“I can’t die.”

This time, it was Shin who cut into her words. His tone was unusually sharp, a contrast to his usual quiet attitude. Alice fell silent and simply watched him for a moment. He turned his crimson gaze downward, refusing to meet hers.

“I can’t afford to die. Not yet. So...I won’t.”

His eyes and tone were terribly stiff. It was like he was talking out of a sense of duty, but there was a dark, tragic tinge to it.

Like he was speaking of his resolve. Of his obsession.

“Does that...”—the question left Alice’s lips before she could stop herself—“...have something to do with that...scar on your neck?”

She could see Shin hold his breath for a moment. He quickly put his hand to his throat, groping it, and when he realized he couldn’t feel the bandages, his crimson eyes widened. Alice pursed her red lips nervously. That gesture alone evoked more than any number of words ever could.

Guren had told her about it before.

I bet there’s a story behind what happened to his neck.

There's an emotion coiled around his throat...like a collar, or a chain, choking him beneath those bandages.

But it wasn't something as simple as an emotion. His pale, slender neck had a jagged, twining, blood-colored bruise. The scar made it seem as if his head had been severed and then stitched back into place. Whatever happened to him had clearly been done out of malice. It was a hard scar to look at.

Alice noticed his wide, red eyes looking up at her. Feeling her gaze meet with these frozen eyes, Alice was taken aback. He was terrified. This boy, who didn't show the slightest bit of fear or dread at the sight of his friend's death or the intensity of the battlefield, stared at her with more fear than she'd ever seen him display before.

He was afraid of being asked about it. Afraid of remembering it. Afraid...to speak of it.

"Aaah, I'm sorry." Alice hurriedly backed down. "That was wrong of me. I didn't mean to look."

He'd gone unconscious, and after loosening his clothes, she was the one who'd taken off the bandages, since she thought they might be choking him. (The Republic didn't send doctors, because this was a battlefield of drones, and they were humanoid pigs.)

She didn't mean to see it, but she did. It was clearly something he didn't want other people to notice.

"I'm sorry. I figured you could put them on after waking up, but I shouldn't have asked... Wait, don't do that!"

Apparently, Shin wasn't listening to her. He tightened his fingers, which covered his throat. His nails were digging into the scar. Realizing this, Alice took his hand. Gently, so as to not surprise or scare him. And upon confirming he wasn't resisting her grip, she softly pulled his hand away from his neck.

Though he was no longer trying to harm himself, his breathing remained quick and shallow. It felt like he was still caught in the icy grip of panic. His youthful features were stiff and pale as a sheet, and his pupils were contracted.

His frozen gaze was peering into the past, and he couldn't see the reality

before him.

“...Nouzen.”

He didn't respond.

“Nouzen. Look at me.”

Still no response... Maybe being called by his last name didn't quite register for him.

“Shin.”

His eyes, which were fixed on one spot in space, wavered ever so slightly. He'd turned his attention to her, if only slightly. Grasping that chance, Alice continued to speak, taking care to keep her voice as calm and collected as possible.

“Shin. Look at me. You're safe now. Look at me.”

She repeated those words, gently gripping his hands. After a while...a considerable amount of time, his small, tense body finally relaxed.

He closed his eyes and exhaled, speaking at the same time.

“...I'm sorry.”

“It's fine,” Alice said, shaking her head vaguely.

Mentioning his scar carelessly had been a mistake on her part. He shouldn't have to apologize.

“I just...felt a little sick, that's all. It's got nothing to do with the scar.”

The way he said it made Alice realize something. The way he was hiding his scar, the way he was afraid others might see it... It wasn't just that he didn't want people prying or that he didn't want to remember it.

He didn't want the person who'd left the grizzly scar to be blamed for it. Even despite them intentionally doing so.

In which case...

Alice briskly undid the scarf around her neck. Spreading both hands out, she extended them over his shoulders and put the scarf around Shin's neck. After

tying a gentle knot, she let go of his body.

Shin stiffened as she did this. She'd leaned over him, as if in embrace. But upon feeling the soft sensation around his throat, Shin blinked once. He looked down, gently pinching the thin, azure fabric in a youthful gesture.

"This way, you can hide it a bit more casually without people asking questions. The bandages just look too painful."

It was like a silent way of saying there was some kind of injury under them.

"...It doesn't hurt, though."

"Yes. But...", Alice said, thinking back to what she just saw.

She honestly couldn't understand the way Shin felt. Someone had hurt him badly enough to leave such a lasting, painful scar on his throat. And his heart was wounded by it, too. Someone just looking at the scar sent him tumbling into a flashback. And still, he insisted on not blaming the person who did this to him. Alice couldn't imagine feeling the same way.

Nonetheless.

"...you don't want it to attract attention or for people to see it, right? You don't want them to blame whoever did this to you, and you don't want others to blame them, either. You want to protect that person, right?"

This must have been how this boy felt. That was the impression she got.

"...!"

Those words made Shin look up at her again. For a moment... For one single moment, those emotionless bloodred eyes wavered so much that it looked like he might burst into tears. Alice gazed back into them and smiled. As if to say he could cry if he needed to, but at the same time, pretending like she didn't notice the miserable way his tears refused to run.

"That's my apology for looking. You can keep it... It's a really good scarf, you know. Take good care of it."

"But...doesn't it mean a lot to you, Captain? You always have it on..."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Back when I joined my first squadron, my old

captain gave it to me. I had this bad habit...”

She twisted her finger like a talon and motioned it over her throat.

“I’d keep scratching my neck like this. So they figured maybe I wouldn’t scratch at myself so much if I had something around my neck.”

It was a habit she developed after her little brother passed away. He had been taken by disease, and his death had been anything but peaceful. She formed the tic of scratching herself raw whenever she thought about it. Her captain couldn’t bear to see it and gave her the scarf that was his trademark. Said captain was a pilot candidate in the Republic Air Force. They’d been left in the battlefield after becoming an Eighty-Six, and that scarf was one of the last personal belongings they had.

It was said that in the past, when all one could rely on to detect the enemy was their own eyes, fighter pilots would wear scarfs. Not on a whim, but because turning one’s head would make one’s neck rub against their uniform’s collar. It was truly a piece of essential equipment for the pilots of the time.

But after radar towers and jet airplanes became the main aerial force—and especially after the Legion stole air superiority away from the human race—it became nothing more than a symbol of longing for the past or a lucky charm at best.

So if nothing else, it could be useful for keeping you safe from your own guilt.

It had been a memento for her ever since. Her old captain finished their term in that unit and moved on to the Spearhead squadron, the first defensive unit of the eastern front’s first ward. A place where the fighting was at its most savage. One of the most lethal wards in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, which consumed millions of lives.

“It’s already helped me long enough. So from now on, it’ll keep you safe.”

1

After a while, his complexion returned to normal, and he’d regained his usual, calm demeanor. Alice took this chance to ask:

“Think you can eat something? It’s almost time for dinner.”

Even the barracks for the subhuman Eighty-Six had some basic facilities. After all, the Republic saw the Processors as no more than parts of a drone, so letting them waste away before they were of use in battle would be counterproductive.

Their dining hall had what could perhaps be described as the world’s most pathetic kitchen, but it did have minimal infrastructure. The prefabricated barracks’ aged dining hall probably had a crack somewhere, because a cold breeze always blew through it, making the place a bit chilly.

As Alice led Shin through the rectangular entrance to the dining hall, Guren, who was standing in the kitchen, looked their way. He glanced at Alice, blinking his blue eyes doubtfully, and then he turned his gaze to Shin and cocked an eyebrow. Alice wasn’t sure what he was surprised about at first, but then she realized. The scarf.

“I see the munchkin came to. That’s good.”

“Yes. I’m sorry if I made you worry, Chief Mechanic.”

“You better. Nouzen, for the love of God, would you stop abusing your Juggernaut like that? The parts that got blown off are one thing, but your suspension system’s rattling again.”

“...I’m sorry.” Shin seemed to recoil from his words at first, but he managed that reply.

Seeing this, Alice realized something. Apparently, he was bad with older people. Like other child soldiers in their later teens or members of the maintenance crew in their early twenties, like Guren. She did notice she’d never seen him approach or talk to older squad members unless they talked to him first.

Male Processors had a higher survival rate thanks to their stamina, and girls like Alice, who survived well beyond their life expectancy, were rare. Maybe that was why he looked so isolated here. The other fledgling boys his age had all died weeks ago.

Guren, who’d pointed this out from the very beginning, shrugged at Shin’s

reactions, showing he didn't particularly mind.

"So, Chef. What's for dinner?" Alice asked him jokingly, eyeing the apron he wore over his coverall.

"Well, Princess, today's luxury cuisine will include a stew of our proud homeland's delectable synthesized rations, with a side of stirred synthesized rations. Please anticipate a meal of a truly otherworldly flavor."

As Guren spoke, he lifted an aluminum plate that had four blocks of what looked like clay resting on them. This was the synthesized food made every day by the base's attached production plant. In contrast to Guren's embellished description, the only food the Eighty-Six were provided were bland-looking bricks of sustenance, and they only came in one variety.

As Shin listened to their jovial exchange, he smiled a bit. It was a truly small smile, and one that didn't come across in his voice, but it was enough to make Alice widen her eyes in surprise.

She couldn't recall ever seeing him smile before. Maybe he finally relaxed a little, for the first time this month.

The only natural thing served in this kitchen was a pot of tea, made by boiling grass growing in the area in place of tea leaves. They both accepted mugs of tea and found empty seats by the long table. Since the synthesized food they got doubled as combat rations, it didn't need to be cooked, and there was no real need for the Processors to eat it at a set time or in a group.

But unless one was extremely misanthropic, most Processors preferred eating three meals a day with their friends. And since the synthesized rations they got didn't even look like food, they did prefer to try to "cook" it into something that at least looked edible, if only for decency's sake.

The Eighty-Six were regarded as subhuman livestock, and so the Republic didn't think they required anything as cultured as cooking. The fodder they'd get would only be good for the pragmatic purpose of providing them with the nutrients needed to work. But if they were to obediently accept the Republic's will like that, the Eighty-Six really would become nothing more than weapon components.

And so as meaningless as it may pragmatically be, Guren sliced their food up into more presentable shapes and arranged the plates with cutlery. That was his modest form of resistance. The most they could really do in their pathetic excuse of a kitchen was boil water, but they did try to serve tea and coffee substitutes and make an effort to somehow spruce up their meals.

As part of that effort, Guren poured some kind of brown sauce onto the synthesized food blocks. That was new. It gave off a sweet scent, and Shin dipped his fork into it once or twice before carrying it to his lips. He then chewed...and stiffened awkwardly.

“...Well, he can try to improve the taste all he wants, but goop’s still goop,” Alice said with a lukewarm smile.

Yes. This synthesized food didn’t just look bad; it also tasted like sludge. After five years in the internment camps and the battlefield, the Eighty-Six had grown begrudgingly used to this flavor. And yet the fact that one could still, after all these years, be flabbergasted all over again by how bad it tasted was impressive in its own way.

It tasted like...nothing. Like something that didn’t even remotely register as food. Owing to its shape, most people described it as tasting like plastic explosives. And maybe that was accurate. It was somehow this miraculous harmony of both the taste of plastic and the flavor of explosives. A vile, gag-inducing sort of harmony.

Incidentally, real plastic explosives are apparently mildly sweet, but they’re toxic and lethal when consumed. Alice was grateful to not be acquainted with any idiots foolhardy or desperate enough to actually taste them.

“...”

Shin chewed on the nonfood in his mouth with an odd, dubious expression and then managed to gulp it down with some tea before finally giving his opinion.

“...It tasting bad is nothing new, but... Hmm, today’s seasoning is especially...”

Alice also carried a bit of it to her lips and fell silent for a moment.

“...I think I see. The sauce goes with it so well that it actually makes it worse.

What kind of flavoring is this anyway? I don't know this seasoning."

"Soy sauce and sugar!" someone called out from the kitchen, prompting Alice to wince.

"More strange stuff...? How does it taste?"

Shin cocked his head curiously. It was truly a childish gesture, a reminder that he really was a boy in his early teens.

"Speaking of, where do these seasonings come from? The production plants only make synthesized food, and I don't think the air transports deliver them, either..."

Alice blinked for a moment. Didn't she tell him already?

"Oh... I guess we haven't gone there since you joined... Actually, near the edge of the Sector, there are some abandoned city ruins. So we get it from the storerooms of the shops and houses there."

"...?"

He didn't seem to understand and instead tilted his head the other way.

"When they evacuated the civilians after the war started, it was done in haste. There's a lot of things they left behind. And in city ruins, you can find all sorts of canned, lasting groceries."

Seeing him raise his head in surprise, Alice couldn't help but smile. That flavorless goop must be really bad if it got even this indifferent boy to ask for something else.

"But we don't get to go foraging there that often... I'm sure you understand by now, but patrol duties in the Eighty-Sixth Sector take up the whole day."

The Legion had a way of avoiding radar detection, so the Eighty-Six had to spend their days patrolling to avoid any surprise attacks.

"So eventually, we'll have to teach you how to hunt and cut animals, too... But that's how we have this whatever sauce."

In addition to wild rabbits, deer, and boars, the Eighty-Sixth Sector had feral chickens, pigs, and cows that had escaped farms. Birds and rabbits were

relatively easy to catch, but all the Eighty-Six and the maintenance crew had to pitch in when it came to hunting and skinning bigger game. Thinking back to those occasions, Alice curled her lips up into a bittersweet smile.

“...I wish I could have had the other fledglings taste it, too... All people at the camps have is synthesized food, right?”

Since the internment camps were covered in minefields and barbed wire, even wild animals couldn't sneak inside, and all the edible plants had been depleted during the early days of the internment. Children like Shin, who'd been in the camps since they were young, might have no memories of eating a decent meal.

Shin couldn't directly answer Alice's words of regret. Instead, he looked around the relatively quiet dining hall and its many empty seats and whispered:

“...There's a lot less of us now.”

“Yeah.”

They'd lost two more in today's battle, reducing their original squad of twenty-four Processors to a mere twelve. They'd gotten to the point where their squad would either need more people or a reorganization.

“That's inevitable. The fighting in this ward is pretty savage.”

Combat with the Legion was never easy, but the battles in some sectors were more relentless than others. The Thirty-Fifth Sector was one such battlefield. But Alice bit her lip as soon as she said that. She had just treated those deaths like everyday occurrences... How could she say something like that?

“...No, that's not true. It wasn't inevitable.”

People dying is never inevitable. Kids who were Alice's age fighting and dying gruesome deaths couldn't be inevitable. How could anyone say it was?

“Captain?”

“Sorry. It's not inevitable. They all survived this far, and each and every one of them was a world in their own right. Losing those lives can't be inevitable.”

Even if thinking that they were might make it easier to survive in this battlefield. Maybe becoming so worn down and desensitized to the point of

complete numbness would be a blessing. But even so...

“They were your friends. People you never wanted to lose... I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be...” Shin shook his head slowly, and then he looked up at her, like he’d decided on something. “Captain... If you could predict when the Skorpion types are there...”

Surprised by the sudden change in topic, Alice stared back at him blankly as Shin continued speaking desperately.

“If you could predict the raids... If you could tell what the Legion are going to do, would that make it so the rest of the unit doesn’t have to die...?”

Alice blinked in surprise a few times before cracking a cynical smile.

“If we could somehow do that, maybe.”

But if they could do that, Alice and honestly any of the other Eighty-Six who’d come before them would have done so a long time ago. Shin looked like he was about to vehemently say something else, but she held up a hand to stop him.

“...Mm. Sorry, but I got a transmission from Command. Tell me about it some other time.”

Shin still seemed keen on saying something else, but he nodded and stepped down.

“...Yes.”

Alice cut off their conversation and left the dining hall quickly because the other person had activated the Para-RAID one-sidedly. She didn’t want Shin to hear her exchange with them. She didn’t want him to hear her cold voice.

“...Took you long enough to respond, sow.”

“Apologies, Handler One. It was crowded in there.”

The overbearing voice on the other side of the Resonance was their commanding officer, a Republic soldier, tucked safely away inside the walls.

The Para-RAID was a communications device that used the collective unconscious to transmit one’s senses and speech. Obstacles like distance, physical impediments, and electromagnetic interference were powerless in the

face of this groundbreaking technology.

“Crowded? It sounded to me like you were toying around with a cute little puppy. A bit too small to drag into bed, though, don’t you think? Or were you thinking of breaking him in early?”

“You’re trash,” Alice spat out.

The officer cackled pleasantly. Teasing a dog from a distance where it couldn’t bite you was probably the best pastime he could ask for.

“Talking down to me when I’m kind enough to give you an update? Bold... There’s signs of a Legion advance group on the move. They’ll probably launch another attack soon, so wipe them out as soon as you detect them.”

A chill overcame Alice as she retorted:

“...Wait. What about the Processor reinforcements I requested? Our number of combatants is down to less than half. A force our size can’t—”

“Stop acting spoiled, you sow. Your numbers are only dwindling because you couldn’t hope to efficiently take down the Legion even if your worthless lives depend on it. Do you really expect human beings to waste their time on inferior stains like you?”

Alice nearly dared him to actually try to lead them for once and see what would really happen, but she managed to stop herself. After leaving all the combat to the Eighty-Six and shutting themselves off behind the walls, the Republic had absolutely no intent of fighting this war. And despite it being his duty and job, this Handler wouldn’t bother actually commanding them in battle.

It’d be for the best if he didn’t Resonate to begin with. Hearing a Handler laugh as they watched her friends die like it were some kind of action movie was a humiliation Alice had already experienced before. And if she could help it, she’d rather not go through that again. Not ever.

“Your answer, sow.”

“—Roger that, sir.”

0

The Thirty-Fifth Sector’s first defensive unit, the Halberd squadron, never

returned from that dispatch.

But that was an ordinary occurrence in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. The hangar stood empty and hollow, with all the Juggernauts it housed just a day ago now gone. Looking around the barren, vacant hangar, Guren sighed heavily.

What he wouldn't give for a smoke right about now. Especially at times like these. But of course, this being a battlefield for humanoid pigs, no one delivered those kinds of goods here.

This was a battlefield of certain death. The Eighty-Six's only lot in life was to fight and die. So at this point, seeing others die shouldn't even be painful anymore. It felt like a foregone conclusion. At least, it did to the big, proud Alba safely behind the walls.

Sliding along the pillar he was leaning against, he sank to the concrete floor.

"God fucking dammit..."

Back when the war first started, he would sit in front of all the maintenance records, tormenting himself over if he and his crew had made some kind of mistake. But he'd stopped by now. And he'd long since given up on trying to come up with some kind of modification that might make those aluminum coffins any safer.

Back then, he couldn't help but ask himself if there wasn't anything more he could do to help those who died... If, perhaps, they could have changed things. But no longer.

There was no such thing he could ever do. He'd realized that by now. After seeing all those deaths, all those bodies piled up before him with such offhanded ease, it'd driven that realization into his heart like a stake.

We are powerless. We don't have the strength to overturn even one iota of this fate forced upon us. And the Eighty-Six, being the inhuman lowlifes that they are, aren't allowed to so much as have the privilege of thinking they can.

Hearing the fidgety footsteps of a pair of safety boots, the maintenance-team members sluggishly raised their heads. Their faces were unshaven from when they'd realized no one was coming back that morning. One of the crew members ran into the hangar from the entrance leading to the barracks.

“Guren,” he said.

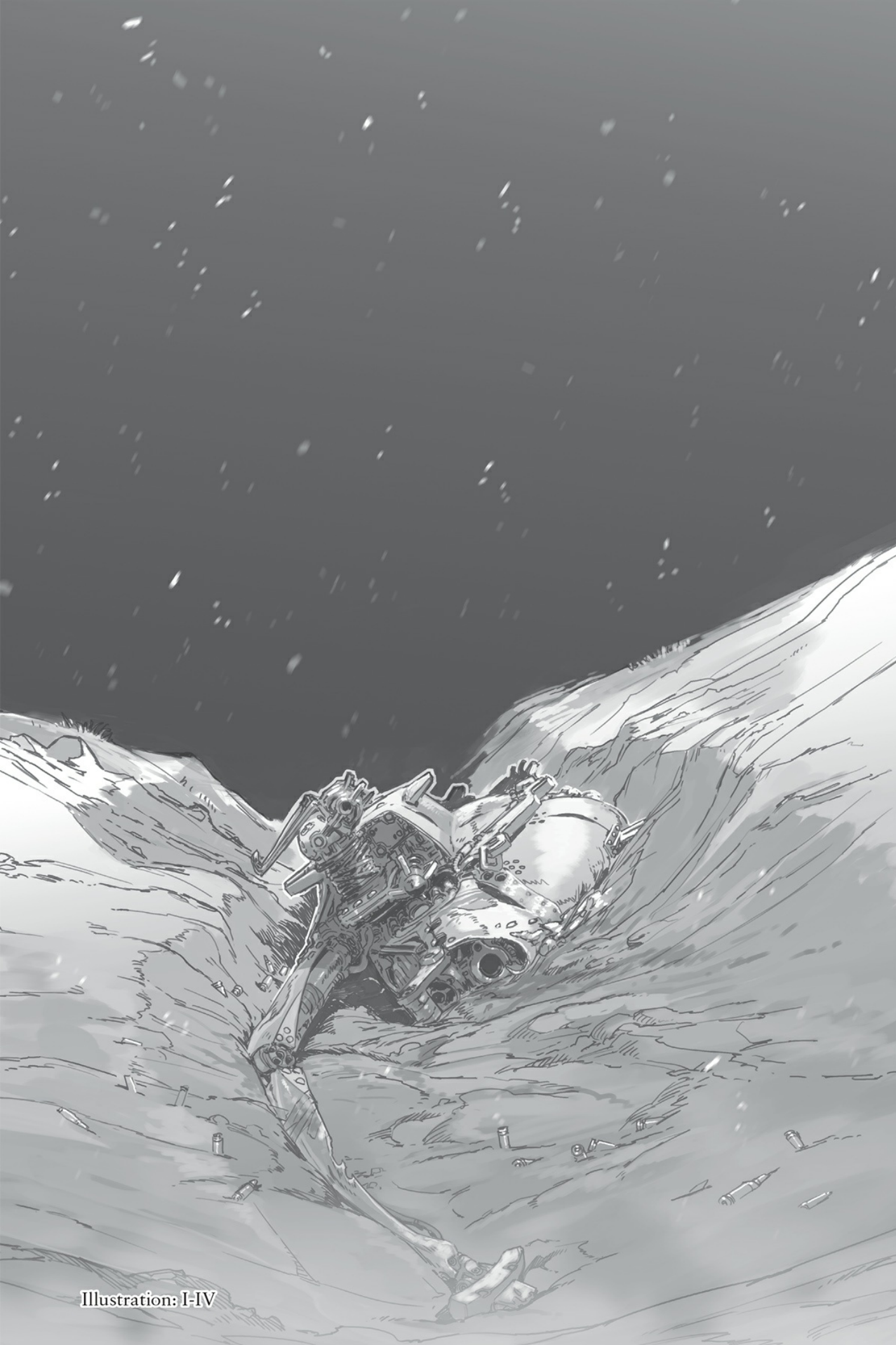


Illustration: I-IV

“What do you want...? There’s nothing left to be flustered about, is there?”

The crew member was clearly out of breath, and he looked utterly bewildered. After struggling to speak through his labored breaths, he finally said it.

“—One of them just came back.”

Guren widened his eyes in disbelief.



The Juggernaut’s canopy was badly assembled, and even when closed, it left a small gap along the unit’s body. But even so, that gap would disappear if the canopy was to be crushed into place. Apparently, the juggernaut kept moving even after its power pack ran aground and the combat was over.

As the falling snow melted against the unit, Guren picked up a metal rod and thrust it into the small gap that just barely remained in the canopy. Using it as leverage, he forced the canopy open.

And upon peering inside...he gulped faintly.

“...Captain.”



Just as it’d risen in the east, shining brilliantly in stubborn defiance of the maintenance crew’s emotions, the sun went on to selfishly set in the western sky. The gloaming’s light was a dark crimson as a shadow crept across the snowy field, illuminated by the evening glow.

He trod through the snow that had built up in the night, seemingly unaware of Guren and the rest of the maintenance crew hurrying over to him.

The Juggernaut was sluggish compared with other Feldreß, but it was still faster than a human, to say nothing of a prepubescent boy. A whole day and night had passed since he’d sortied. And during that time, he’d been marching nonstop, likely forgoing sleep. He’d sneaked past the prowling Legion, dragging his exhausted body all the while.

His camouflage uniform was too big for his short limbs. His black hair and azure scarf were moist from the snow. And most striking of all were those

bloodred eyes, which stood out even in the gloaming's crimson glow.

“Nouzen...”

But none of them approached him. Everyone, Guren included, was fixed in place as they watched him with breaths held.

At the sound of that voice, Shin stopped and looked up. He'd been looking down at a round object he was carrying cradled against his bloodstained chest.

It was covered in a cloth that was red with discolored blood. Only half of its beautiful features remained, but the size of it made it clear what it was.

It was *one half of Alice's head*.

“...!”

It was a sight that made Guren doubt the boy's sanity, but his bloodred eyes showed no signs of madness. Quite the contrary, in fact. They were clear to an almost cruel extent. His lips were pursed, like he was holding back rage, but his cheeks, dirty as they were from dust and blood, were dry of tears.

But when he settled his emaciated eyes on Guren, it felt like his gaze softened somewhat with relief. Even so, Guren and the others couldn't move. They were probably wondering how and why, but his reasoning wasn't that difficult to intuit.

The human body was heavy. And though she was a girl, she was tall and the oldest of the group, which only made her heavier. Shin, small as he was, couldn't possibly carry the weight of an entire person. And after a battle with the Legion, her body was likely in no condition to be transported anyway.

So at the very least, he had to bring back a part of her. Since he couldn't return with her entire body, he probably thought he could at least return her *severed head*.

That wasn't an idea a sane mind could come up with. It was a product of the mind-numbing madness of the battlefield. But at its core was nothing but the kindness of a boy who wanted to bring a friend home. And so the truth was...

Guren found himself unintentionally gritting his teeth.

The truth was they ought to praise him. *Good on you for at least bringing*

Alice back, they should've told him, you really do care for your squad mates. They should've thanked him, commended him for what he did.

If we... If I... If Shin... If Alice... If the Eighty-Six were at least human...

Dammit. Guren looked up to the sky. God, oh, God... Just what...?

What sin did we commit...? Why do we have to say this to him...?

"Nouzen, you...can't do that."

Shin blinked his bloodred eyes in a way that seemed almost inappropriately childish. His expression showed that he clearly didn't understand what Guren was talking about. But Guren looked down at him and continued speaking.

Guren's words were ruthless. Words that went against both common sense and human decency. But this was one thing he couldn't allow.

Shin survived, all alone. He survived, even if he was the only one to do so. And so Guren *couldn't let him die after this.*

"Alice can't come back to the base like...that. We can't collect the Eighty-Six's bodies. You know that already. The Eighty-Six have no graves...and we aren't allowed to dig them any."

This was the humanitarian, progressive battlefield with zero casualties that the Republic took so much pride in. And the Republic wouldn't let anyone or anything shatter its facade of infallibility. Casualties that don't exist can't have graves. They can't dig graves for someone who never died—at least as far as the documents are concerned. And so...

"So you can't do that. We can't let you bring Alice back to base."

"..."

He blinked his bloodred eyes. In confusion. In bewilderment. Guren grit his teeth as he watched him. Yes, he could tell. Shin was hanging on to his sanity by a thread. All his squad mates—all the friends he'd lived with, even if only for a few months—had died before his eyes in the space of a single night. Murdered in a ruthless, one-sided atrocity.

How could he remain sane? Going mad felt like the natural course of action. And as he teetered on the edge of insanity, he could only cling to the duty of

returning his comrades home. He could only try to protect his mind by clinging to his human ethics.

“...But—”

“No buts... You remember what Alice told you, right? You even made a promise. She didn’t say that because you don’t leave bodies behind; it’s because you can’t bury anyone, regardless of if they leave those bodies behind or not... It’s because the most anyone can do is leave their names behind.”

His bloodred eyes widened.

Let’s make a promise, everyone. We’ll carve the names of those who died on their units’ fragments and have the ones who survive carry them.

That way, the ones who survive until the very end can bring everyone else along with them to their final destination.

That’s right. He finally understood why Alice...why Processors who survived for years in the Eighty-Sixth Sector would say that. Even if they fight to the death, they’ll never have a grave marker. And so that promise was the last bit of consolation in the face of that fate. There was no greater salvation they could hope for, and they would get nothing better.

But he still shook his head slowly. Was it denial or rejection, or...?

“Even so...there’s no reason we shouldn’t do it just because they said we can’t. We don’t have to listen to what the Republic citizens who aren’t even here would say—”

“We can’t,” Guren said, gritting his teeth.

“But—”

Why won’t this brat listen? He still has no idea...no inkling of the sheer malice of the Eighty-Sixth Sector. He won’t even try to understand the pain of those who have to say these things!

“We can’t because we can’t! If we start going against what they say and dig graves, and the Republic finds out about it, what do you think the white pigs will do?! They’ll kill you, that’s what! Even Processor kids like you!”

The Republic’s citizens might have shut themselves behind the walls, but that

didn't mean they never went out to the battlefield. They delivered supplies to the Processors and recorded unit assignments. The soldiers came all the way out to the Eighty-Sixth Sector to perform those duties.

And even the garbage collectors, the Scavengers—those were made by the Republic, too. Who's to say they didn't have some kind of surveillance device? Who knew where the white pigs had eyes, and if they somehow happened to find a forbidden grave, it was clear what might happen.

"They won't kill maintenance-crew members like us because they can't replace us, You're the only ones they'll dispose of. And not just the ones who dug the graves—they'll take out the whole unit! You get that? If anyone digs a grave and it's discovered, the Republic will kill every single kid assigned to this unit! Everyone! And it'll *all be your fault!*"

For a moment, Shin's crimson eyes widened and froze over, like he'd just been struck by lightning. Guren was taken aback by his excessive reaction and fell silent.

For a second, it seemed like his red eyes weren't looking at Guren anymore, but at something else far, far away. At some subject of fear and obsession and impetus and even deep-seated emotions of self-condemnation and penance.

But in the next moment, Shin hung his head and took a step back, as if to hide the terror in his frozen eyes. And with his gaze to the floor, he whispered in a fading voice.

"...I'm sorry."

Guren shook his head. He'd gone too far, and Shin had nothing to apologize for. The truth was that Shin did the correct, human thing to do. But neither Shin, nor Alice, nor Guren, nor anyone here was human. That was all.

"...Nouzen."

Guren approached him, but Shin drew away, as if to protect Alice in his arms. His expression stiffened as pain flooded his red eyes. He couldn't look Guren in the face.

"I'm not throwing her away," said Guren. "I'll be returning her to the earth... Not to the battlefield—I can't go that far, but I'll bury her somewhere far from

here.”

Even so, this was the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and the Legion could be anywhere. It was a reckless act, but Guren didn’t say that.

“...”

“I’ll handle the rest... You did good making it back here.”

He reached out and picked up the bundle of Alice’s remains. This time, Shin didn’t resist.

“...Whoa, there.”

The moment the weight left Shin’s hands, all the tension drained from his body. The boy staggered, and Guren caught him with one hand. Apparently, he’d gone unconscious... Both the exhaustion and the mental strain had pushed him way past the limit.

“Guren.” One of the crew hurried over to him.

“Sorry, can you handle him? Let him rest, at least for today.”

Leaving Shin with the crew member, Guren walked into the east as the darkness of the dusk settled over the sky like a curtain. He carried with him Alice’s silent, unliving remains. It occurred to him, at that moment, that Shin hadn’t shed a single tear.

He somehow slipped past the Legion’s patrol lines and reached the ruins of a church, where he buried Alice’s remains in a rose garden.

“You’re finally on the side of those who leave others behind, aren’t you, Alice?”

There was so little left of Alice; the hole he’d dug for her was small. And with the snowfall of winter, there were no flowers he could offer her. But the Eighty-Six had no graves to begin with. Alice knew that well enough.

“Leaving a small kid like him all on his own...? You’re one awful woman, you know that?”

All Processors are awful in that way, honestly.



Every six months, when a squadron's term ends, or whenever one is wiped out, the unit gets dissolved and reorganized. Now that the Halberd squadron had been annihilated, with the exception of Shin, its members would be completely replaced by new ones, while Shin would be assigned to a new squadron.

Guren saw Shin off as a transport plane full of soldiers in Prussian blue uniforms landed to ferry the boy over the minefields to his next ward. Cradled in the boy's arms was a bundle of cloth. He carried it just like he had with Alice's head before, but this time, it was full of metal shards. Upon seeing it, Guren parted his lips.

"Nouzen, that's—"

"I was the last one to survive," he replied, his voice stiff and blunt.

Shin had refused to look at Guren since. He hadn't said a word to any of the maintenance crew since he'd come back from the battlefield. It felt like he was avoiding the living, like he didn't have the time to bother with them.

Like he was instead using that time to face and commit his deceased squad mates to memory. The bundle he carried contained the metallic fragments that had the names of his twenty-three dead squad mates etched onto them. A cold wind mixed with snow drifted through the battlefield, rustling the azure scarf around his neck.

The last memory and memento of Alice, rich with her feelings.

For a moment, his bloodred eyes, which refused to look at Guren, felt like they contorted in grief. Bitterly and helplessly. But even so, Shin still wouldn't shed a tear.

"I made a promise with Captain Araish and the rest of the squadron. A promise between me and everyone who died. So I'll take all of them...to my final destination."

Appendix

Noticing the door to Shin's room was open, Raiden peered inside. The room was bright with sunlight, and Shin was lying collapsed on the bed. He was curled up like a child with the covers just barely spread over him, his back exposed.

Seeing this, Raiden exhaled in exasperation. The floor between the door and the bed was littered with his flight suit's top and collared undershirt, like some kind of trail of footsteps. Shin's attitude with regards to his everyday life was terribly messy and rough. It was like an almost scary contrast to the lethal precision with which he danced upon the line of life and death when he was on the battlefield.

He showed such little interest and care for himself, and it manifested both on and off the battlefield.

If nothing else, the thought of at least folding and putting away his clothes didn't so much as occur to Shin. But given the way some of his clothes were scattered in random directions, he must have been very exhausted.

At this point, as trivial as it was, Raiden had to wonder how Shin ever managed himself in the dorms of the special officer academy. That place demanded stiff adherence to regulations, and he couldn't imagine how they'd ignore that kind of behavior.

A certain bespectacled classmate of Shin's from the academy would have sarcastically noted that Shin was on point during his time at the special officer academy, but sadly, Raiden never met him.

Either way, he entered the room, his military boots clicking loudly on the floor. As he walked, he picked up the flight-suit top and undershirt and...

"Clean up after yourself, asshole."

...dropped them over Shin's head. Ruthlessly.

"...?!"

The armored flight suit might have been made out of fabric, but it was

bulletproof, resistant to blades, and heavy overall. Having it dropped over his head, even over the covers, was enough of a shock to jolt him awake. Shin squirmed his head out from under the mountain of fabrics and spoke in a groggy voice.

“...What?” he asked hoarsely.

“Don’t ‘what’ me. I know we spent all night training, but put your clothes away before you go to sleep.”

Why was he being scrutinized with such judgmental eyes? Incidentally, Raiden still wasn’t aware that his penchant for making these kinds of comments was why everyone was calling him Mom behind his back.

For now, Shin sat up in his bed. The flight-suit top slid off his head and rustled to the floor. With his flight suit off, he was in the Federacy’s plain underclothes. He had two ID tags—which they had never been given in the Eighty-Sixth Sector—hanging on a silver chain that was dangling against his tank top. Looking away from that silver glint, Raiden settled his gaze on the red scar etched into his throat.

Looking at it made Raiden ponder. When was it that Shin stopped being so adamant about not letting others see his scar?

When they first met, Shin absolutely loathed the idea of people catching sight of it. He’d always have that scarf around his neck, and people simply mentioning the scar seemed to annoy him. By the time he felt comfortable talking about the story behind the scar, he wasn’t hiding it as adamantly. Although, he was still mostly concealing it with his scarf.

This was something Raiden had worried about when they came to the Federacy and joined the army. The Federacy’s uniform was a blazer, and even if its collar was mostly hidden, the scar could still be visible from certain angles. And while one could modify the way they wore a flight suit, that wouldn’t fly in a training facility like the special officer academy.

So Raiden was concerned about it at the time, but he never said anything since Shin didn’t seem all that troubled by it. Despite it being summer, he never loosened his tie and continued to wear his scarf, even during battle. So he was still at least somewhat intent on hiding it.

Raiden looked away, his gaze settling on the azure scarf. It was faded from years of exposure to sunlight on the battlefield and sat folded on Shin's desk.

...When they were first rescued by the Federacy, they collected their personal belongings, and out of everything they had, Shin only asked that they return the scarf and his pistol.

"...You sure?"

Shin blinked at first, taken aback by Raiden's sudden question, but upon seeing his gaze on the scarf, he gave a vague nod.

"Yeah..."

He put a hand to the scarf. It was probably an unconscious gesture. Then he shrugged.

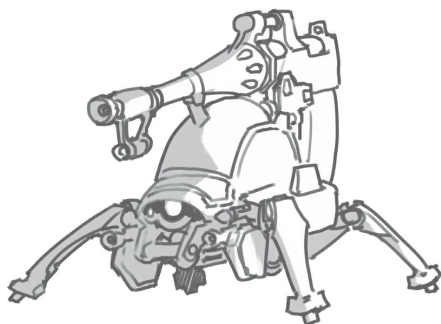
"I think it's kept me safe for long enough. I just don't have any reason to let go of it or put it away... It's from the first person I promised I'd take with me, after all."

"..."

So it was a memento of an old comrade. Someone Raiden didn't know, from the first squadron Shin was assigned to. Shin curled his lips into a somber, serene, and slightly soft smile. When Raiden first met this guy, he never imagined he could smile this way.

"It doesn't bother me anymore, but...I don't really want anyone...especially not Lena to know the story behind it."

The story of someone who was already gone. Someone he had to slay at all costs...but never truly hated. The story of that sin.



FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY

》《Misericorde》



These are the fragmental stories that
turned the boy into a Reaper...



[EIGHTY-
SIX]

Countless souls were claimed.
But no deaths were recorded.

CHAPTER 2

FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY: MISERICORDE

3

He drew the pistol from the holster on his right leg and used his left hand to move the slide. With this one, he didn't have to worry about the safety. It was a double-action pistol, but pulling the slide back cocked the hammer.

With the power of a string, the slide popped back into place, drawing the first bullet from the cartridge and loading it into the chamber. This series of actions turned the pistol from an 845-gram lump of metal to a tool for manslaughter.

At the end of the barrel were the front and rear sights. By looking between them, he could see his comrades littering the battlefield.

Isuka couldn't call this a weapon.

After all, an automatic pistol wasn't something the Eighty-Six could aim at their enemies, the Legion. No, this weapon had only one role.

To kill his fellow Eighty-Six.

He unceremoniously fired his gun. Three shots, certain to meet their marks. Since this gun was built to be portable, its barrel was short, making it a pistol with unreliable penetrating force and accuracy. But when aimed at a target lying at one's feet, it wouldn't miss.

Nor would any of its bullets stray and hit the idiot right next to the target. That one had gone to the trouble of dragging a dying moron out of their Juggernaut into the open.

The boy likely had no idea what Isuka was doing when he'd drawn a pistol on their dying friend. He stared at the fluid hand motion of him cocking the gun in

what bordered on curiosity, his bloodred eyes widening as blood began pooling over the concrete.

He likely didn't know that once the heart stopped, blood didn't spurt out of the body anymore. He probably didn't realize this person had just died.

"Wha...?" the boy uttered.

"Next time, don't pick anyone up like this, Shin," Isuka said bluntly, looking down at him.

With the pistol having performed its task, he set the hammer back into place and holstered it. The battle with the Legion was over, it seemed. Even if there was a bullet left in the chamber, it wouldn't matter.

The child soldier sitting on the ground continued gazing blankly at the fresh corpse sprawled next to him on the ground. It only made sense he'd be dumbfounded. Despite his small physique, even for an eleven-year-old, he'd dragged an older, heavier Processor out of his unit. And Isuka had casually rendered all his toiling into wasted effort.

Or maybe he was just pointlessly shocked at the sight of seeing someone die. Isuka didn't really know. He'd long since cast away that kind of sentimentality, so he could only hazard a guess.

After looking up at him for a moment, Shin gradually contorted those distinctive bloodred eyes into a reproachful, accusatory gaze. They were the color unique to a noble Rubela bloodline—the despicable Pyropes of the Empire's nobility. Beautiful crimson, ruby eyes.

"...Why?"

"Ha." Isuka breathed out indifferently, curling his lips up into a smirk, as if to say the very question was absurd.

But then suddenly, Isuka roughly reached for Shin's slender throat.

"...!"

In the two weeks since Shin had been assigned to his squadron, Isuka had learned that Shin hated when people reached for his throat and reacted viscerally when someone touched it. Isuka didn't know the reason, and he

honestly didn't care. All he knew was that it was a convenient way of keeping the boy under control.

Taking advantage of Shin freezing up, he grabbed him by the collar and pulled him down, showing him the corpse. This Processor's legs, which had certainly been there before they sortied that day, had been ripped off. And he forced Shin to look at the gruesome wound.

Shin swallowed nervously, and Isuka whispered into his ear.

"I'll tell you why, so listen up, moron. People have these things called veins and arteries. Guess newbies like you never went to school, so you don't know. Anyway, they're these thick blood vessels."

All the new child soldiers who were sent to Isuka's squad—the fifth ward's second defensive unit, Stiletto—were all kids who'd been thrown into the internment camps five years ago, when they were seven or eight years old. There were no human schools in a pigsty for subhumans. Which meant kids at Shin's age, who were only entering their teen years now, never got a proper education.

Isuka didn't care for that, but some of the education they lacked included vital knowledge. And he'd seen plenty of idiots who'd lash out at him over this kind of sentimentality. He kept talking, throwing a venomous gaze in the direction of their squad mates, where the ones in charge of teaching the newbies were.

"And those blood vessels run through the arms and legs. So if those blood vessels tear..."

When a blood vessel circulating large amounts of blood is damaged, it leads to a lot of blood leaking out of the body.

"...people die. If not on the spot, then soon after that. Painfully. That's why..."

...we put them out of their misery.

After spitting out those words, as if to etch them into the boy's mind, he pushed him away. Isuka was eighteen, and Shin was eleven, so their physiques and strength were all too different. Shin helplessly fell with his hands sinking into the blood puddle, then he looked up at Isuka gravely. Desperately.

“But if him bleeding out was the reason, we could have stopped the blood. If we treated him, we could have saved...!”

Isuka couldn't help but laugh at his thoughtlessness. Such a dumb, unperceptive brat. Didn't he understand? The other squad mates looking on didn't step in to stop Isuka. They watched indifferently, like it was some kind of boring spectacle they'd already seen countless times over.

“Treating him...? You think there's medical treatment in the Eighty-Sixth Sector?”

“...”

There were no military physicians in this hell. After all, it was a “humanitarian” battlefield, where “drones” did all the fighting instead of humans. A battlefield of zero casualties—where only pigs in human form died in place of people—had no need for doctors or military hospitals.

Of course, it would be a problem if Processors couldn't participate in battle because of nonlethal injuries, and so each of the frontline bases had automated machines called medical units. But those only treated light injuries—injuries that wouldn't prevent one from returning to active duty. And any wounds that weren't critical and only required rest and recuperation were written off as non-life-threatening and otherwise ignored.

As Shin said, if they could have stopped the bleeding and treated this Processor, perhaps he would have recovered. As unlucky of an idiot as he'd been, it had been, in truth, quite possible to save him.

...At least, *it would've been*, were the Eighty-Six still considered human.

Feeling that oddly sentimental thought rake over his mind, Isuka clicked his tongue. Disgusting. Talking to Shin reminded him of emotions he was better off forgetting.

With that comment, which was too casual to sound like a sneer, he glared down at Shin's bloodred eyes and said:

“If you still don't understand, I'll explain it one more time, brat. We Eighty-Six are pigs in human form. We're not human. So don't bring up sensibilities from when you were human ever again, or else...”

He turned around, stomping on the puddle. The Eighty-Six had no graves, and so they couldn't retrieve any corpses. That was one limitation the Republic's white pigs forced on them, but Isuka was actually grateful for it.

The Eighty-Six need no graves. They depart for battle with nothing but their aluminum coffins and absolutely no support, and each time, they die meaninglessly. That's their lot in life. Digging them graves and mourning them... would only dredge up the kinds of emotions they lost when their humanity was taken from them. And if he did that...

"...you'll die."

2

Upon suddenly hearing the sound of splashing water from outside the barracks, Isuka stopped in the middle of the corridor. Looking out the first-story window, he saw the youngest Processor in the squadron standing like a wet mouse for some reason in the square in front of the barracks.

A large bucket's worth of water had been dumped over his head. Mirei, a fellow Processor, threw away said bucket and mouthed a clearly fake, hypocritical apology.

"Oh, sorry about that, Shin. I slipped."

This bucket had been placed in front of the hangar to gather water a few days ago when it was raining hard. It'd been left unattended in the hangar for days. No amount of carelessness would have gotten that bucket to the front of the barracks, where it would splash all over Shin.

Mirei continued his disingenuous apologies to Shin, his violet eyes watching him like a cat toying with a mouse, while the other Processors and maintenance crew looked on all around them, some of them sneering, others indifferent.

"..."

Shin wiped the filthy water off himself. He didn't seem bothered by it, but mostly tired. He'd gotten used to this after that many times. Being splashed with water in the early-spring chill, finding razors hidden on his room's

doorknob, approaching his bed only to discover it drenched with muddy water, seeing the words *walking plague* and *traitor* scribbled on his Juggernaut...

He looked up at this person, who was standing a head taller than him, with scorn and cruelty that felt unnatural for an eleven-year-old boy.

“You don’t have to apologize... You’ll probably forget about it and do the same thing to me in five seconds anyway. You’re as dumb as a chicken.”

Birdbrained, forgetful, only knows how to clamor and cower even when he clucks around with the rest of his group... Nothing more than *livestock* that obeys its master.

“...What did you say?”

Mirei’s expression darkened. He was exactly the way Shin described him. Single-minded, foulmouthed, and only capable of parroting curse words he’d heard from others. Seeing he was about to give Shin an earful like always, Isuka turned to leave.

If it was a brawl, well, he couldn’t have them injure each other and would need to step in. But despite his size and youthful appearance, Shin was quite strong. He knew where to aim and how to apply his strength, and he didn’t hesitate to punch people. Even with that difference in physique, Mirei was likely in for some pain. That was why neither Mirei nor his cronies, despite being angry, actually dared to raise a hand to him.

Maybe Shin had learned how to defend himself when he was picked on like this in the internment camps or in one of his former squadrons. Or maybe someone who’d sheltered him taught him how to fight on a whim.

At some point, Isuka’s squadron’s machine gunner, Ruliya, observed the argument and spoke. She was a petite, skinny girl, roughly the same size as Shin despite being five years his senior, and had a timid face.

Outside the window were the same old swear words, shouted at Shin one-sidedly. The same old words. *Pest. Vermin. Coward who only survived by hiding behind his friends. Combat freak. Imperial dog. Traitor.*

There were rumors going around about how the two squadrons he’d been in so far were all wiped out—and how he fought in a way that didn’t fit his age

and experience. People would also criticize the colors of his eyes and hair.

“Isn’t it about time you stepped in, Isuka?”

“If it bothers you that much, why don’t you step in instead, Ruliya?” Isuka replied curtly.

Ruliya winced, and Isuka turned around and looked down at her. The corridor hadn’t been cleaned in a long time and was both covered in dust and cluttered with objects. A stench wafted up from the lower level’s unused kitchen.

“Ever since he showed up, you’ve just been watching from the sidelines while acting like some kind of saint... Guess it’s good for you. This way, you don’t have to be the one sipping on mud or being fed insects.”

“...”

Her expression stiffened, and she fell silent. Ruliya’s dark skin was proof of her heritage as a mixed Deseria. They were a minority in the Republic and were a small ethnic group even within the Eighty-Six. The grand majority of the Republic’s population were Alba even before the war. But most of them, even the Eighty-Six, had the fair skin of the Vespertina.

For example, Isuka had a Celena’s silver hair and the golden eyes of a Heliodor, and yet he still had the same pale skin color. Mirei had Viola roots, his friends were of Violidia and Ferruginea origin, and Shin was half Onyx, half Pyrope. These peoples all shared the Vespertina’s white skin.

But Ruliya, who had darker skin, stood out. Just like the Orientas with their ivory skin and the Meridiana with their black skin, the Deseria were “outsiders” who had not only a different eye and hair color, but also differed in skin tone. And as such, they were hated and ostracized in both in the internment camps and the frontline bases.

Just like how the majority of the Alba discriminated against the Eighty-Six, the majority of the Eighty-Six persecuted their own people, simply as a means of taking their frustrations with life out on another scapegoat.

And the most hated of all were the noble Imperial races, the two races that were involved in the Imperial bloodline of the Giadian Empire, which had started this war. The Onyxes and the Pyropes. No one considered those two

races as fellow Eighty-Six or even as fellow Vespertina.

They were the descendants of the damnable enemy that had triggered this war, and the hate for them was second only to the Alba themselves. They were seen as offenders who carried some of the burden of the blame for the Eighty-Six's fate, as outsiders to be hated and punished.

And through some odd twist of fate, Shin was from both Onyx and Pyrope blood. And so it was only natural that the belligerence of the Processors and maintenance crew shifted from Ruliya, who had been scapegoated purely because of her skin color, to Shin, who had the blood of the enemy running through his veins.

"He won't have it as hard as you will anyway. Unlike you, he's strong."

Shin was skilled and capable, both in and out of the Juggernaut, and had enough wit to know how to painfully insult Mirei after just a few days. Everyone was afraid of him getting back at them, so they only hurled insults from a distance or harassed him in *little ways*. All they did was ostracize and ignore Shin, but they didn't do much more.

Shin knew this, and if he'd need to, he wouldn't hesitate to turn to violence. And he was seemingly getting fed up with reacting to the relatively harmless kinds of harassment, so he ignored them for the most part.

"Do you still wanna cover for him? For a kid with Imperial blood? You've got a heart of gold, Ruliya. Go on, then, help him. Do it now. Go break up that fight. Say, *Cut it out, you guys.*"

You know you can't.

"..."

Discord, hesitation, fear, and a hint of anger swirled for a moment in her reddish-brown eyes before she hung her head and fell silent.

"...A towel," she eventually said.

As he stared at her, Ruliya averted her gaze awkwardly.

"If you just leave him wet like this, he could get sick. And if he breaks down, it'd be a problem for you, wouldn't it? He's your precious scapegoat, after all..."

After saying this spitefully, Ruliya turned around and left. Seeing her walk away, Isuka snickered. Was this her way of being snide?

“What are you saying? He’s a scapegoat for you, too.”

For him, for Ruliya, for the entirety of this base. Isuka knew all about the way Shin was being bullied, same as how he knew that Ruliya was being bullied before, and in both cases, he did nothing to stop it. At first, he even egged the others on, setting it up so this would happen.

Because if he didn’t, none of them would survive.

They rode in aluminum coffins that were poorly armored, lacking in firepower, and had weak suspension systems. To survive in those things, they needed perfect coordination and cooperation. And the easiest, most certain method of forming solidarity within a group...was to mark one member as everyone’s enemy.

Everyone would criticize, throw stones at, and ostracize that scapegoat, forming a common denominator and feeling of camaraderie that everyone—except for one of them—could share. They all opposed a common enemy, and that would brew a powerful binding effect in the group.

That was why Isuka always picked one of his squad members to serve as a scapegoat. That was how he was fighting this war. In most cases, it was the weakest, most burdensome member of the group. Someone with the type of conduct, appearance, or personality that would draw everyone’s ire. Someone who was easy to single out like Ruliya, or an Imperial like Shin.

He made examples of obvious, clear-cut scapegoats whom everyone could regard with unrestrained enmity, condemn to their heart’s content, and self-indulgently treat as an outlet for their frustrations.

Their natural enemies were the Republic’s white pigs, of course. But those were hiding a hundred kilometers away, behind walls and minefields, and hardly ever appeared in the hellscape of the battlefield. And enemies who didn’t feel real and present were the same as nonexistent ones.

And despite how advanced and ruthless they were, the Legion were automated machines that moved according to programming... Directing hatred

at them felt both hollow and foolishly misguided.

Some people rejected that method at first, clinging to justice and a sense of ethics. But that was only at first. Those people eventually threw rocks and jeered just as gleefully as everyone else. Violence in numbers made it so that no one criticized the justice of your actions, and that lack of consequence made it the most satisfying pleasure of all. It was perhaps the only kind of diversion truly available in this sealed battlefield.

It went without saying that most of the people who'd been rendered into scapegoats went on to die soon enough. Their comrades offered them no support in battle, and the discrimination in their daily lives chipped away at their hearts and spirits. Before long, their willpower and stamina would be exhausted, and they'd either perish in battle or kill themselves.

Having them die so easily would be a problem, and so Isuka forbade everyone from excessive violence and didn't allow the scapegoats to carry pistols, for fear of them ending their own misery. Sadly, many found alternative methods.

In that regard, Shin was holding on longer than expected. He was strong, both within the base and out on the battlefield.

Isuka snorted. He was the one who'd made Shin into a scapegoat, so the fact that he seemed harder than most was a welcome discovery. However...

"...Unfortunately for him..."

Being strong enough to endure constant harassment and abuse was nothing special. Not here, in the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

1

"Speaking of, we haven't received a demand for a goat lately, Vulture."

Hearing this comment from the Handler speaking to him through the Para-RAID from the other side of the wall, Isuka snorted.

"The little black goat we got recently is lasting longer than expected."

The Handlers were cattle keepers meant to make sure the Eighty-Six wouldn't

rebel, but a lot of them were idiots who neglected their jobs. The Handler assigned to the Stiletto squadron was relatively diligent, though. It was mostly the difference between a neglectful idiot and a hardworking one.

They were idiots and disgusting white pigs just the same. They stayed behind the walls and thought anything that occurred on this battlefield was none of their business. The Republic had no intent of fighting this war. To them, drones simply fought each other to death in some faraway world, and sometimes, these drones would remember that and regard them with scorn in their eyes.

Either way, that was how Isuka, the long-running captain of the Stiletto squadron, had known this Handler for quite a while, despite neither of them knowing each other's names or faces.

And the Handler of course knew about the reason Isuka requested "goats" every now and then. Weak, useless members, or members of minorities. And given how short the cycles were with which Isuka asked them to send new goats, he likely had some inkling that the goats were being treated cruelly enough to die that soon.

But among the goats the Handler had sent him, Shin was proving to be quite the catch. He clearly looked like he had noble Imperial blood, but he was in fact stronger than any of the previous scapegoats and indeed most of the squadron. Maybe the fact that his origins were that obvious made it so he had to get stronger if he was to survive.

And as expected, he was surviving much longer than the average scapegoat. He accepted the way his squad mates treated him, and yet, in stark contrast to how detached he looked, he seemed to care for them.

Mirei, who had picked a fight with him not long ago, had died in the previous day's battle. But Shin survived. Isuka had recently started asking himself if Shin only let his squad mates' bullying slide because he knew they were bound to die before he did.

"You damn pigs eat your own—even the children," the Handler sneered. "You Eighty-Six are barbaric. That's the kind of vulgar behavior we noble Republic citizens can't understand. Filthy subhumans."

"Like you're one to talk, Handler One," Isuka sneered in turn.

The Eighty-Six were supposed to be citizens of the Republic just the same. The Republic used child soldiers, like him and Shin and Ruliya, as disposable parts of a drone.

Isuka felt a cold, almost terrifying silence settle over the Resonance.

“...Don’t act like you’re our equal, you filthy stain.”

This did nothing to really scare Isuka. The Republic locked them away in this battlefield and forced them to fight, but it wasn’t like a simple civilian like this Handler had any special authority over the Eighty-Six. The most he did was send them supplies, and if the squadron got wiped out, it would be seen as the Handler’s fault.

Apparently, with the Republic’s territory having been greatly reduced because of the war, the unemployment rate had become quite high, and so the Handlers worked in exchange for a monthly wage. But it seemed the Handlers weren’t pressed for money enough to accept having a pig talk back to them.

In the end, all of the Republic’s citizens were the same. They closed themselves off inside a sweet dream, plugging their ears and shutting their eyes to achieve false peace. Stupid, slothful white pigs.

Isuka sneered again. Coldly.

“I apologize if it came across that way, esteemed human master.”

Like anyone would want to be your equal, you white pig.

Dealing with idiots was easy, but it wasn’t particularly pleasant. As soon as the Sensory Resonance closed, Isuka clicked his tongue and walked away from the hangar wall he’d been leaning against. Exchanges with their commanding Handler was his duty as captain. And each and every time, it was irritating to go through.

Much like the barracks, they neglected to clean the hangar. It was littered with spare parts and empty containers, and the air was distinctly dusty. The number of Juggernauts lined up in the hangar had strikingly decreased over the last few battles. Shin’s unit was crouching in the corner, stained with spots of red paint the squad mates found somewhere.

But despite fighting in an urban battlefield with these absurd colors on his rig,

Shin survived today, too. They forced the most lethal roles onto him, like serving as a decoy or the rear guard, and he kept using a haphazard combat style that pushed the Juggernaut's already poor suspension system to its limits.

To begin with, the Stiletto squadron was in charge of a highly contested ward. In this battlefield of zero casualties where people died left and right, this was one sector that stood out in the number of Eighty-Six lives it claimed. And despite this, Shin survived.

And as if to counteract Shin's tendency to survive, the other squad mates seemed to have started dying more often ever since he joined the squadron. This was a bit of a source of a headache for Isuka. Both because the squadron's combat potential was decreasing, making the battles harder...and because the atmosphere in the squadron was becoming worse.

The glares and whispers directed at Shin were gradually building up and turning to clear enmity. *You pest*, they would say. *Bringer of ruin. You call death to your comrades.* The bullying was escalating every day, and it was approaching the point where Isuka felt like he had to step in for the kid.

If a Processor chose to off themselves or was dumb enough to be killed by the Legion, that was one thing. But Processors killing each other was where the line had to be drawn. It was a final *restraint* that could never be allowed to come undone. If it did, all order in the squadron would go out the window.

He'd set him up to be a scapegoat so the Processors would survive, but consequently, that was only making them die that much faster.

But just as he grimaced, he felt something pass him by silently.

"Oh."

He didn't notice he was there. Looking down with a hint of surprise, he saw someone with distinctive black hair, wearing a blue scarf and a uniform that was too large for their small physique.

Shin.

Much like a prowling animal, he walked without any footsteps. Hearing his reaction, Shin flicked his emotionless bloodred eyes in his direction, implying that he didn't notice Isuka was there, either. Isuka had been leaning against a

wall that was horizontal from the hangar's entrance; that was hard to spot when walking in. Shin narrowed his eyes, his gaze fixed on the wall.

The way he looked at Isuka had become much bleaker and colder compared with the anger he'd shown when Isuka chided him for trying to help that idiot who'd gotten his legs blown off. He looked at Isuka like he were a nasty insect or a pebble in his way and then turned away.

Apparently, he was intent on ignoring this coldhearted captain who shot any squad mate who'd become a burden. Same as how he ignored his squad mates, who despite being discriminated Eighty-Six ganged up on anyone weaker than them.

Those cold eyes seemed to look down upon him, as if in condemnation...as if he was a person who'd reduced himself to a wretched status.

"...Hey."

Isuka called out to him before he knew it. He could tell he had a crooked smile on his face. The same sneer he always had when he interacted with his squad mates. An unamused smirk that intimidated, pushed away, and coerced.

"Is that piece of metal from Mirei's rig? You actually picked it up?"

He asked that question while eyeing the small metallic fragment Shin held in his hands. It had the color of the Juggernaut's plating, that of dried bone. Even the Stiletto squadron had heard of how Shin recorded the names of those who died with these fragments. He usually relied on whatever pieces of wood or metal he could find. But he did use scraps of their Juggernaut's armor when he was lucky enough to locate them. That wasn't very often, since the fragile Juggernauts were frequently blown to bits.

He had several fragments with names carved on them in his rig's cockpit. They looked like junk, but there was a time when a squad mate took them out of his Juggernaut and tossed them into the mud, only to have Shin beat them up until their face was unrecognizable. Judging from that, these pieces were seemingly important to him.

This was part of why, despite him being a scapegoat, one had to take their hat off to Shin.

The other squad mates and maintenance crew all seemed to believe he was doing it in the same vein of how the battle-crazed Imperial nobles would claim the severed heads of their enemies as a prize. Shin, being the god of pestilence that he was, instead boasted the number of allies he got killed instead of the enemies he slayed.

But Isuka knew that wasn't the case. Before, some squad mates who'd been relatively sympathized toward Shin and were now dead said that he was doing it because of a promise he'd made with his first squad captain. The last one to survive would remember those who had died fighting beside them and carry them with him. This was how he kept that promise up.

Would he end up bringing Isuka with him, too...?

...That's stupid.

"I'm sure you're not enough of a birdbrain to forget what Mirei did to you. And you're still taking him along?"

The water he'd splashed on him, the insults he'd hurled every day, how he'd always use him as a decoy to stall the enemy. And he was still taking him along?

"Are you seriously that stupid? Between this and how you keep trying to save the dying... Do you get off on being a hero or something?"

"...That's not it." Shin's reply was indifferent, like he didn't even fully acknowledge Isuka was there.

He was probably looking back to whoever forced that promise on him, someone who was already gone. Whatever irresponsible person they were to force him to make that promise before going ahead and dying first.

"It's because the Eighty-Six don't get graves. If someone doesn't remember those who died, they'll just disappear. So I just want to remember everyone."

"Oh," Isuka said with a thin sneer. "So what kind of guy was Mirei? A petty bully who picked on and shouted at anyone smaller than him every day, only to die like a bitch?"

No one would want to be remembered like that.

But Shin didn't seem to acknowledge Isuka's sneering, his crimson eyes

instead sinking into reminiscence.

“...He was a joker who always laughed, always put on a brave face even when it was hard, and always tried to keep his friends cheery.”

The sneer disappeared from Isuka's face.

“He never directed that behavior at me, but just looking from the side, I could tell that was how he treated others...and that's something good enough for me to take along.”

“...”

Isuka contorted his face bitterly. At that moment, it finally hit home why this brat pissed him off so much.

“...You think you're some kind of saint, kid? Here, in a battlefield where no one's human?”

The Eighty-Sixth Sector is hell. No one can stay normal in a place like this. And Shin was still holding on to his dignity, on to the image of what a sane, decent human being should be. That was something Isuka had discarded, and he wasn't interested in ever picking it up again, but it felt like Shin was showing him off.

“I'm just doing what I want to do and not doing what I don't want to do.”

Because I don't want to end up like you.

“Fucking brat—,” Isuka growled.

“Besides,” Shin cut him off.

He finally averted his clear, bloodred eyes, displaying a hint of bitterness for the first time.

“Even I have things I don't do, despite the fact that I could... Even if I told you, no one in this squadron would believe me anyway. So there's no point in saying anything.”

A Löwe suddenly appeared in front of Isuka's Juggernaut.

The fifty-tonne Goliath's absurd performance allowed it to land from its jump with a silence one would never imagine given its size. It swung the front left of its four thick legs down at him. Since Isuka was too close to its turret, it chose to kick away the unsightly insect instead of shooting it dead.

"Oh, shi—"

Then came the impact.

When next Isuka opened his eyes, he realized he had been knocked out of his Juggernaut and onto the concrete outside. Looking around, he found his Juggernaut toppled over a short distance away, its frame ruptured. A red trail of blood extended from the Juggernaut, leading all the way over to where Isuka was lying.

It was his blood.

...I screwed up.

Sighing, Isuka looked up to the sky, his back resting against the concrete. The thick, water-resistant fabric of his field uniform hid it, but he could feel the inside of his stomach growing hot. His internal organs had ruptured. And there were no military physicians in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, so he couldn't hope for medical treatment. This was a fatal wound.

A stomach injury wasn't like a wound to the head or chest. Even if one doesn't get help, the wound won't kill that quickly. And he didn't want to writhe in agony, unable to die in some corner of the battlefield as screams and gunfire echoed around him. Isuka reached for his right thigh to grasp the pistol holstered there...

...but his fingers passed through empty air.

He couldn't feel the grip of the gun, but worse yet...he couldn't feel his leg altogether.

Looking down, he saw that under his uniform top, his legs were missing completely.

"...?!"

Turning around fearfully, he saw the missing half of his body spill out of the open cockpit of his toppled Juggernaut. The pistol was just barely in its holster, hanging slightly over a pool of blood littered with his severed fingers, dangling just out of reach.

He couldn't tell how long he spent lying there dumbfounded. An inappropriate snicker spilled from his lips, and every bit of strength drained from his body. He couldn't force himself to crawl all the way there. To begin with, his hands were missing fingers anyway, so he couldn't reliably grip or shoot the gun in the first place.

At this point, he didn't care if he lived or died.

But this was inevitable, he thought as his dulled sense of pain was beginning to resurface. He'd been a Processor for over three years. He'd tried to keep his squadrons united so he could ensure his own survival, and doing that had consumed the lives of many of his comrades.

So many had died, either to the Legion or by their own hand. Trapped in a battlefield where they were throttled about by the malice of both the Legion and the Republic, their hearts grew haggard and ill from seeing even their fellow Eighty-Six regard them with spite.

And it was all because Isuka had made it so.

And this was the retribution he got for it.

It looked like the rest of the Stiletto squadron was still fighting, though they were on the back foot. They likely weren't in any condition to come rescue him. He'd either bite the dust here, without any of them knowing...or his squadron would simply be wiped out, and the Legion would take him away as their spoils of war. Whichever it'll be...

...I won't get an easy death...

But just then, the monotone world of the rubble's dull gray and the thin, silvery clouds of the Eintagsfliege were invaded by vivid red.

Isuka turned around reflexively, his eyes catching sight of it. There was a shade of black like the darkness of night had been refined into color. A shade of crimson, redder than blood.

“Nouzen...”

Isuka’s whisper was so quiet that Shin didn’t seem to hear it. But Isuka could see his Juggernaut squat down in the edge of his field of vision. Its cockpit opened, and Shin disembarked, hurrying over to Isuka’s unit. He was so utterly defenseless, even Isuka couldn’t help but worry. If just a single self-propelled mine was nearby, he surely would have died.

He shouldered his assault rifle, which was far too large for his small frame. He didn’t have a pistol, though. Isuka never let him have one because he didn’t want him to take his own life like so many scapegoats before him.

He approached Isuka’s Juggernaut, as silent as the Legion’s own footsteps, and inspected how damaged it was.

Apparently, Shin did it because he’d broken his own Juggernaut. Looking at it, the heavy machine guns on both of its grappling arms were badly damaged. The barrels were bent out of shape, as if he’d bashed them against the enemy. On top of that, his Juggernaut didn’t look like it’d stay properly balanced when stationary. One of its four fragile legs had its joint bent and snapped off.

He’d lost his secondary armaments, and his unit wasn’t capable of normal mobility, so he decided to switch over to another Juggernaut, even if its cockpit was slightly damaged. Unfortunately for him, the cockpit to Isuka’s rig had been wrecked from top to bottom, and the Juggernaut wasn’t operable.

Seeing this, Shin shook his head, and then he realized that the scattered remains of Isuka’s stomach were spilling out of the cockpit. He swallowed nervously, then traced the blood trail, eventually discovering Isuka himself.

His bloodred eyes—their shade of crimson clearer and purer than the blood and viscera spread over the ground—settled on Isuka. On his damaged, severed stomach. On his hands, which had less fingers than they should have had. On the fact that despite it all, he was unfortunately, tragically still alive.

Just like the squad mate he once shot before Shin’s very eyes was unfortunately, tragically still alive.

At first, Isuka was completely prepared to see Shin turn around and leave him to his fate. Isuka had treated him awfully, after all. Why would he save him?

And Isuka wouldn't lower himself to begging for mercy. He wouldn't, and he didn't have the right to anyway.

The red eyes fixed on him froze over. As if hesitating, torn by some internal conflict.

What the hell are you doing? Isuka thought bitterly. *What's there to be confused about? I hurt you so much. What other option do you even have if not to abandon me? Just leave me here to die. Go. Hurry up and leave. Begging you for mercy would just be humiliating. Don't make me do something as pathetic as asking someone I hurt for help...!*

But then Shin pursed his lips...

...and drew the pistol from Isuka's bloodstained holster.

"...What?"

Isuka was speechless for a moment. And then Shin turned the muzzle in his direction. It was shaking slightly but still fixed on his head. On the other end of its sights were eyes full of conflict—fear grappling with a shaky resolve.

He was hesitating. Not over the likelihood of saving him. But over making the heartless choice of shooting him dead without even *trying* to treat him, even if it was in the name of ending his suffering...

But Isuka's surprise soon faded away. And in its place, he felt an inexplicable rage. He wasn't entirely sure what he was angry at, but the emotion clouded his field of vision.

Dammit.

God dammit. This is what I get, huh? This is who I have to see at the very end...

Without Isuka knowing it, a self-deprecating smile played over his features.

God dammit. If this is the punishment I get...

He lifted his right hand, which felt far heavier than it should have, and nudged the exposed bone at the end of his remaining thumb between his eyes.

If you have to do it, aim here.

"You know how to use it, right? Pull the slide..."

Before he could even finish the sentence, Shin pulled the slide back with his small hands and loaded the first bullet into the chamber... Someone really had taught him how to do this. After pulling it as far as it would go, he clicked it back into place.

Whoever taught him to handle a gun probably hadn't actually trained him to shoot people, though.

"You don't have to worry about a safety with that one. It automatically cocks the hammer when you load the first bullet. You just need to aim and shoot."

He said this, of course, knowing that this final part was the hardest. Shin would have to shoot Isuka, who was still alive and stirring, while looking him dead in the eye. The sight of it would likely be seared into his mind. Human instinct naturally loathed the idea of taking another life, making it the most terrifying act imaginable.

But if this dumb kid didn't do it now, he'd probably be haunted by regret for the rest of his life. The regret of not finishing off this fool who couldn't even die properly.

"It has space for fifteen bullets. Means you can *shoot up to fourteen times* and not worry about it. Go on. Shoot."

"...?"

Shin forced his ragged breaths to calm down, doubt clouding over his unnaturally hard gaze. Isuka shook his head with a pained smile.

"But don't use that last one on anyone else. The last bullet is for when *you're* about to die. That way, you can put yourself at ease. That's one thing you should never...ever let someone else do for you."

Shin had to be at least that selfish...or else Isuka, someone who had lived his life in an entirely selfish way, would never rest in peace.

Having said all he needed to, Isuka closed his eyes. Shin could at least do that much. After some hesitation, Shin exhaled, and the atmosphere about him became cold and morose...

Come on, you idiot. Don't let this get to you.

The first shot missed Isuka by a wide margin and bored into the asphalt to the side of his head. The second shot blew one of his ears off. The fact that he even grazed him on his second attempt was commendable, in a way.

The thought that Shin was going to take him along crossed Isuka's mind.

How would he remember me, then? He isn't going to take what I just said and the fact that I gave him a few pointers on how to use a pistol and call that kindness, is he?

For a moment, an inappropriate smile played over Isuka's lips.

If that's the case, then he really is an idiot.

He thought he could hear the third gunshot blare out. And that was the last thing Isuka ever heard before his brains were scattered: the final knell of mercy.

The first two shots missed their mark, but the third one hit his forehead, just like he'd asked.

The pistol prioritized mobility as its most important factor, and so its barrel was short, making its accuracy and penetrating force negligible. It may have been a military pistol, but a 9 mm caliber wasn't always enough to finish someone, so Shin fired another two shots to guarantee the kill.

He'd shot him, just like he was taught, and only then did Shin realize Isuka was no longer moving. Now that his heart had stopped, the blood began pooling. It was a dull red, mixed with something that wasn't blood.

Shin slowly lowered the pistol and sank to the ground, as if unable to bear the weight of it, though it weighed less than a single kilogram. His body was awash with cold sweat. Realizing he'd held his breath all this time, he finally exhaled, time and again.

"H-haah...!"

But the shaking and nausea he was expecting never came. There was no panic or discomposure. And their absence was what really shocked Shin. Lying before Shin was a fresh corpse, produced by his own two hands. And despite killing another person, it did little to shake him. And that crushed him harder than anything else.

I knew it. I...

His hand unconsciously went to his windpipe. Feeling the fabric of his scarf, he drew his fingers back for a moment and then grasped his throat hard.

Get up. It might not happen right away, but the sound of that gunshot is going to draw the Legion here. Get back in your Juggernaut before that happens. Escape and live. Fight.

Some force of instinctual will, something deeper and more primal than his own will, spurred him to move. He looked up, his bloodred eyes once again alight with the cold intensity of a warrior.

When he got to his feet, the near-900-gram pistol no longer felt heavy to him.

He picked up one of the shards of the Juggernaut lying in the puddle of blood and started to walk off. He turned around at the last second, gazing at Isuka's expired, discarded remains.

"...Captain."

He was someone he never held any respect or affection for. The only thing this person ever directed at Shin was unreasonable malice. But the way he never abandoned those who were injured and couldn't die by shooting them dead... Looking back at it now, Shin could realize this was his way of taking responsibility for his comrades.

Isuka had been so used to it that he made it look casual. He'd finished off so many people that he'd grown accustomed to it. And that was probably because he'd never pushed that responsibility onto anyone else.

Shin could remember that resolve of his.

"I'll be keeping the pistol...and your duty. Until I meet my end."

And he'd remember his name, and that final, faint, pained smile he showed.

With that thought in mind, Shin turned his back on him.

Appendix

He drew the pistol from the holster on his right leg and used his left hand to move the slide. With this one, he didn't have to worry about the safety. It was a double-action pistol, but pulling the slide back cocked the hammer.

With the power of a string, the slide popped back into place, drawing the first bullet from the cartridge and loading it into the chamber. This series of actions turned the pistol from an 845-gram lump of metal into a tool for manslaughter.

At the end of the barrel were the front and rear sights. By looking between them, he could see the human-shaped targets aligned before it, and he fired casually.

He loosed three shots each, expecting to hit each one. After knocking down five targets, the slide stop popped up. He took out the magazine and stopped shooting. Confirming that the pistol was empty, Shin lowered the weapon.

Shiden, who was leaning against the booth's partition and peeking in, gave a short, crude whistle of amazement.

"Not bad, Li'l Reaper. Hitting every shot with only a pistol. Impressive shit."

They were in the training grounds of the Federacy's Rüstkammer base, the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package's headquarters. Namely, in the shooting range. Shin ignored her and dropped the empty magazine, moving the slide ahead and loading a new clip. He pulled the slide back to check the chamber, and after confirming it didn't have a bullet loaded, he spoke.

"...I thought it might have gotten some kind of modification after it got fixed, but I guess not."

"Mm? Oh..." Shiden nodded and then shrugged.

After the battle with the Morpho, Shin discarded his pistol only for Shiden to retrieve it. When she was picked up by the Federacy, she asked her adoptive guardian to find a workshop that could get this pistol fixed.

"I was thinkin' about it, though. Like leaving the frame as it is but expanding it

to a 40 mm caliber—or adding a full-auto feature.”

So she had considered it. Shin frowned. He wouldn’t have wanted either of those features attached to his gun. True, he was the one who’d discarded it, but he still didn’t like it.

“But it’s not like any of those would be useful against the Legion anyway. This thing’s only good for killing yourself, so I figured ya didn’t need it. B’sides”—the smile suddenly left Shiden’s lips—“for how old it is, it’s pretty well maintained. I could tell it meant a lot to ya, so I thought I’d give it back as is.”

“...”

Hearing this, Shin looked down at the pistol, feeling its familiar weight in his hands. When he was picked up by the Federacy, he and the other members of the Spearhead squadron didn’t have many possessions to their names, but he couldn’t bring himself to part with this gun. Thankfully, despite the Federacy military’s fussy regulations, it shared the same ammunition as their official striker-fired sidearms, so he was able to keep on using it even if it meant putting up with some complaints... So yes, maybe saying he was attached to this pistol wasn’t off the mark.

“I guess it is.”

He’d thrown it away after the fight with the Morpho, using the excuse that it was broken. But thinking back on it now, he figured he should probably thank her for repairing it and returning it to him.

“You have my thanks for both fixing it and giving it back.”

“By that, ya mean yer gonna thank me, but yer not actually gonna say *thank you*, are ya?”

Shiden said this with a smirk and teasing eyes, but Shin glared at her coldly enough to stop her from prodding him any further. After a pause, she asked:

“Was it a memento from some old squad mate?”

“Was it?”

There was an odd nuance to that reply that prompted Shiden to stare at Shin’s expression. He wasn’t playing coy. It really sounded like Shin didn’t know

how to answer. Even though, given that this was from his time in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, he should have received a pistol ages ago.

“I think he hated me. I know I hated him... My having not just Imperial blood meant people kept picking on me.”

“...Oh.”

Shiden suddenly grimaced and growled, which made Shin glance at her. Shiden’s snow-white eye was proof of her partial Alabaster blood, while her other eye was indigo. She had heterochromia, a rare occurrence, and one of her eyes was that of an Alba—the oppressor of the Eighty-Six.

So she’d probably gone through *something similar*.

This didn’t make Shin feel much affinity for her, but...

“Wait, hold up. If that’s what happened, why’re you acting like a pistol *that* guy gave you is so important?”

“...I’m not sure. I think I remember saying something about taking over his role.”

The role of finishing off comrades who were injured beyond saving but couldn’t die. And ever since taking that role, he’d never relinquished it to anyone else.

Shin had never had a pistol before then, and once that person died, Shin received and fired this pistol, inheriting that role at the same time. And ever since, he’d used this exact pistol. He’d even discarded it once, only for it to find its way back into his hands.

So when someone asked him why he cherished it, he couldn’t quite come up with a reason. But he could say this—it’d been heavy at the time. It was too large for his hands back then and had a different kind of recoil compared with an assault rifle. A recoil he couldn’t quite get used to.

But at some point, he’d grown accustomed to its weight and recoil and reached the same height as him. Did he catch up to his age, too? Shin didn’t know. He’d never asked him, and he would probably never find out.

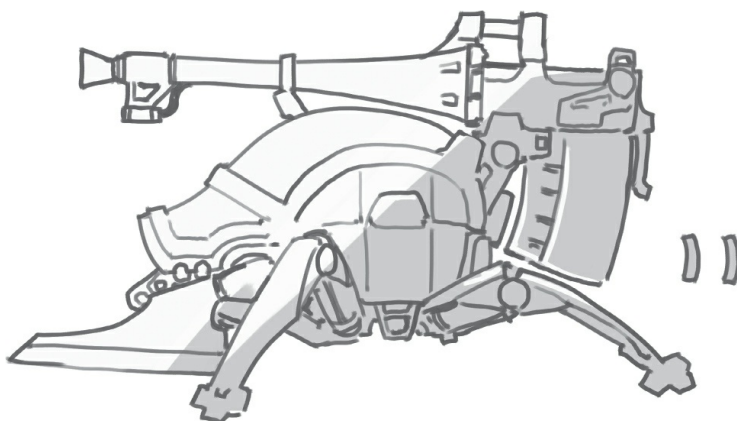
“But I think looking at how the captain was back then was what taught me

how to shoot this thing... It gave me the resolve to use it. So—”

The last bullet is for when you're about to die. That way, you can put yourself at ease.

That's one thing you should never...ever let someone else do for you.

He didn't have to direct that kind of consideration toward Shin, but he said those words anyway. That squad captain, with his sarcastic eyes. Shin never knew his full name or his age. And by now, all he could remember were those few words and the expression he'd made in his final moments...



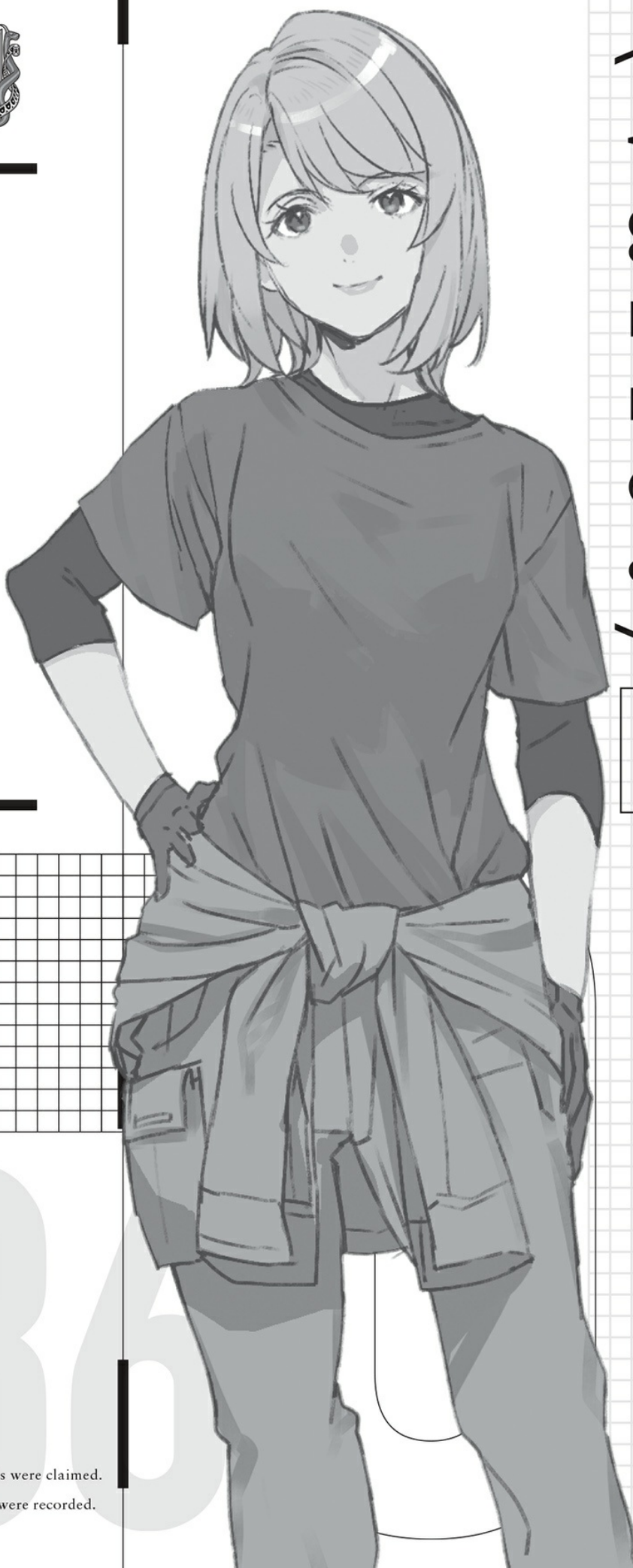
FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY



<V a r i e t y>

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

85



These are the fragmental stories that turned the boy
into a Reaper...

Countless souls were claimed.
But no deaths were recorded.

CHAPTER 3

FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY: VARLET

1

The steel tidal wave washed over both the earthen road beneath and the concrete highway above him.

He was deep in the contested zones, at a multilevel crossing of an abandoned expressway. There were Ameise keeping watch from the surface, while the sturdy expressway, which was made as an emergency military express road, was teeming with Grauwolf and Löwe.

The lightweight Grauwolf could traverse the soil with relative ease, but the Löwe had a combat weight of fifty tonnes, and so it struggled to move through the bog. With the Eintagsfliege blanketing the skies and the Stier usurping air superiority from their enemies, the Legion could traverse the land without fear of bombardment from above.

And that was precisely what made this place a perfect site for an ambush.

“4th Platoon, open fire.”

At Shin’s order, the cannons of the four other Juggernauts in his platoon roared. They were hidden directly beneath the expressway, *between the piers that supported it and the expressway itself*. They’d climbed up with their wire anchors and squatted their units down as far as they could. The Juggernaut, being a small Feldreiß, could just barely hide in that space.

With concentrated fire, they noisily collapsed the pillars in front of them. They caved in, catching all the Legion on and around the road in the collapse. Even a reinforced concrete road made for military transports couldn’t withstand concentrated fire from tank turrets.

The Legion lines in the center of the road were all knocked down. It was impossible for their optical sensors to see through the dense concrete of the road, but even the Juggernaut's feeble audio sensors could detect through the thick obstruction that the enemy was divided into three forces.

An Ameise swiveled its optical sensor skyward, only to be crushed by the rubble and the weight of the falling Löwe. The Legion's established tactic was to deploy the Eintagsfliege to block off humankind's radar and launch one-sided attacks. Because of this, they assumed the chances of them being detected and ambushed while on the march were exceedingly low.

Having to fall several dozen meters knocked even the central processors of the Löwe into a state of confusion, making the large units freeze up in shock at the unexpected development. As they did, Shin ordered the second wave of fire. The shells bored into the relatively thin top of their turrets.

With that, they eliminated the troublesome Löwe that had crashed down. This left...

"4th platoon, follow me. Captain, eliminate the Legion left above us."

"...Roger that."

"Stop ordering people around, 4th Platoon Captain."

The Legion couldn't tap into the Para-RAID communications, but the Eighty-Six were still obligated to use Personal Names or code call signs during communications. This included the Handler's call sign of *Handler One* and was done so their given names wouldn't leak in or out of the Gran Mur.

Shin and his 4th Platoon's units descended to the surface using their wires. The 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 5th Platoons also jumped down from the expressway and attacked the Legion, using the dust of the collapsing rubble as their cover.

"Haunted freak."

Even through the tumultuous noise of the battle, everyone in the squadron could hear this whisper reach them from the Resonance. Shin didn't regard it as he approached a Grauwolf. The mechanical menace had finally recovered from the shock of falling down. As it tried to turn around, Shin's Juggernaut slid across the mud, skidding into the enemy's flank and firing the machine guns on

its grappling arms.

The lightweight Grauwolf boasted great offensive power, but its defense was nowhere near as high as the Löwe's. Still, unlike the Juggernaut, machine-gun fire couldn't penetrate its frontal armor, so one had to attack from the flank.

As the Grauwolf crumpled lifelessly to the ground, Shin sprinted away and rushed the next one. The impact of the fall had rattled their central processors, and they couldn't move in tandem to stop the ambush.

But even with the enemy side being so confused, the Juggernaut's performance couldn't match the Legion's. And so it was Shin's role to create these situations and keep up the momentum. He plunged into the heart of the surviving Grauwolf unit, tearing into their lines. Without even looking at his radar, he could tell his squad members were deployed behind him, splitting the Legion up and individually taking them out.

His right machine gun ran out of bullets. A warning that the same was about to happen to his left one popped up in his holo-window. Shin clicked his tongue and switched his armament selection to his 57 mm cannon. Its recoil was intense, and it wasn't useful in melee combat. But the fact that ranged weapons could run out of ammo was a painful blow.

The Juggernauts were built to be light, and as such, the amount of machine-gun and cannon ammo they could carry was limited. Of course, this meant that running out of ammo in the middle of battle was a predictable problem, and so the squadrons were accompanied by supply drones. But their AI wasn't advanced, and they couldn't follow them to such frantic battles.

If only I had some melee armaments.

That pained thought crossed his mind between engagements. Melee weapons were anachronistic. They'd been driven into extinction by firearms, which required less training and had greater range. Modern warfare was governed by cannons, which could fire kilometers ahead, and so the use of melee weapons was seen as suicidal.

But they did have one advantage firearms lacked. Melee weapons never ran out of ammo. They could keep cutting into the enemy, slashing at them until they broke or shattered. So having that as an option would make things just a

little bit easier.

It seemed the platoons above them were struggling to dispose of the Legion on the remains of the expressway. The Legion had perhaps sent a request for support, because the Legion force patrolling on the left side changed course to help them. They moved among the buildings so they wouldn't be caught by the radar, but Shin had predicted this ahead of time. He had the remaining 6th Platoon lie in cover in their direct path.

But then Shin realized: The 6th Platoon he'd set there to intercept them weren't in their positions. And looking up, he could definitely hear the members of the 6th Platoon speaking from the hectic fighting above them.

"Nosferatu, a Legion detachment changed course and is heading our way. We can still hit them from the flank. Have the 6th Platoon return to their posi—"

"I told you to stop ordering people around, Delta Leader. I'm the captain of this squadron, and I decided we need to prioritize taking out the main force. Besides...who can trust anything you say? Haunted freak."

Shin grimaced at those words. This captain was two years his senior and refused to listen to a younger soldier's words... No. Shin's age wasn't the reason he hated him so much... And as if to make a show of that, the squad captain continued his irritated spiel. He spat out the words with utter disdain in his voice.

"And stop Resonating with us. It's jarring having you on the transmissions, you mon—"

But the next moment, the captain's voice cut off. His Sensory Resonance shut down. And a moment later, Shin heard the heavy metallic thud of something being struck, and then the roar of a Löwe's 120 mm turret.

A cannon shell had been fired at an initial velocity of 1,600 meters per second, far quicker than the speed of sound. And so the sound of the shell impacting its target reached him before the roar of the cannon did.

That sound was the prelude to the entire operation falling apart.

Fighting a Löwe alone wasn't impossible for Shin, but fighting them one-on-one without any support from his comrades was difficult. Using the ruined Juggernauts of his comrades as bait, he shot a Löwe from behind and sunk it.

Standing in front of the Löwe's remains, Shin let out a sigh. As smoke and sediment continued to rise from the battlefield, he disembarked his unit, walking through it undefended.

There were no friends or foes left alive. Both the combat drones left behind by a fallen country and the weapons piloted by those who were stripped of their humanity and deemed subhuman had fought each other to the death, leaving behind only smoldering city ruins.

It'd happened again. All his squad mates had died, and he was the sole survivor.

Now that he was alone, he couldn't recall how long he'd spent fighting. His mind had already learned the hard way that stopping for even a second could get you killed, and so it spared no resources on pondering such pointless sentimentality. Only once the fighting ended did he have time for the sorrow to set in.

He looked to his Juggernaut and shook his head. Its machine-gun and tank-turret ammunition reserves were empty, and its energy-pack reserves were too small.

He'd warned them, but no one listened. No one believed him. He was used to others speaking poorly of him, calling him a possessed grim reaper who beckoned death and the enemy to his comrades. Every squadron he'd been in since he was drafted, every single one, had been wiped out, and he was always the only one to survive.

He had to get used to it. To the death of his friends. To being the only one left alive. To being blamed and told that this was all his fault.

But for some reason, that day, he felt awfully tired. An inexplicable sense of emptiness crept up his legs and bound him. An absurd, nonexistent weight pressed down on him, and he could only stand still.

What was the point of surviving? In the end, what awaited him was the same as always—a warrior's death on the battlefield...

But even so, he couldn't die yet. So he dragged his heavy feet over to his Juggernaut, which had been remaining on standby, when...

“...Mm?”

...he spotted something amid the rubble a short distance away. A toppled-over Scavenger...

2

Scavengers were unmanned support units that escorted squadrons to battle. They were loaded with ammunition and energy packs, which they used to resupply units in the heat of battle. Shin didn't know what their official name was. But since they patrolled the battlefield after fights were over to restock on supplies and picked reusable parts out of wrecked Juggernauts, these blocky, awkward transport units were colloquially called Scavengers.

Shin's squadron had multiple Scavengers escorting them, which had apparently all been destroyed in the battle. Fortunately for Shin, though, that unit still had its container attached to it.

With his ammo depleted and his energy pack almost empty, he doubted he could return to base from the contested zones. He knew there were no Legion around at the moment, but the enemy was swift, and if he was pursued by them, he wouldn't have the means to fight them off.

He was prepared to gather the supplies he needed from his squad mates' ruined Juggernauts, but this was a much easier alternative.

Shin stopped his Juggernaut next to the mountain of rubble, disembarked his unit, and approached the Scavenger. It was an old model, the kind that'd been introduced early on in the war. Models like this one were hard to come by. It was sooty and stained from the dust of the battlefield. Its body was squarish and angular, while its four legs were rounded. It was a clumsy, unshapely drone with two crane arms and a lenslike optical sensor.

It was completely silent and sunken diagonally into the rubble, like a dying hound crouched on the ground. Apparently, it'd been shot in the legs. On top of its container being intact, its crane arms and its internal burner and cutters were all whole. But with the Scavenger itself being dead, they couldn't move.

The container's lock was simple, so it could be disengaged without much effort. Looking around its sooty surface, Shin held back a sigh. Much like the Juggernaut's canopy, the doors to all the Republic's "drones" weren't closed by electronic locks that required passcodes. All one needed to open them was to pull a bar.

Now that Shin needed to get supplies from this Juggernaut, this worked in his favor, but the Legion had the self-propelled mines and the Tausendfüßler, which had armlike manipulators. He'd seen comrades of his who'd gotten stranded in the middle of battle run into them, only for the Legion to open their canopies and drag them out.

The Republic only saw the Eighty-Six as disposable processing units, so they never considered adding features that would protect them. Their technology was too lacking to develop a successful AI or a powerful Feldreiß, but they could at least make an electronic lock.

Suddenly, Shin completely stiffened. Maybe it was his exhaustion from the battle. Pushing away that sarcastic thought, which had surfaced to the front of his mind with cruel clarity, Shin reached for the container's opening bar. The pebbles of the rubble under his feet spilled from beneath his boots and tumbled down.

The lock disengaged with ease. But the problem presented itself as soon as he opened it. Namely, it was the supplies the Scavenger was carrying. After all, the Juggernaut was an exceedingly weak, poorly cobbled together death trap, and every one of the supplies it required was large and cumbersome. As weak as its 57 mm cannon turret might have been, the magazines containing its shells weighed well over 100 kilograms.

Shin was still short and small, and so this weight was well beyond his capacity to move. The ammo weighed twice as much as he did. Nonetheless, he could extract the shells from the cartridge and carry them out one by one...

...even though doing so wouldn't change the fact that he'd eventually die a meaningless death on the battlefield.

That cold, dark, and intrusive thought once again reared its ugly head. Sighing, Shin shrugged it off. When did this odd sense of exhaustion and emptiness start

occupying a corner of his mind? He'd first noticed it when his last squadron was wiped out, but it had probably been there even earlier, and he just hadn't realized it.

No matter how much he fought on and remained the last man standing, in the end, he'd never really gain anything. There was no meaning to fighting or surviving, and yet—

Just then, the Scavenger's optical sensor flickered. One of its crane arms, which was resting in an uncomfortable position, suddenly jerked. The manipulator at its tip opened and closed with a loud metallic crunching sound, as if testing its operability.

“Whoa—”

Shin pulled back with a start. He was already used to the battlefield, but he still couldn't help but let his voice slip. He looked at it with shocked curiosity like he was seeing someone rise from the grave—after all, from what he could tell, this machine was basically dead—as its two crane arms dragged the magazine out of the container. It remained loyal to its programming...or rather, it almost seemed like the drone wasn't even aware of its own death, sticking to its supply duties even when it was half ruined.

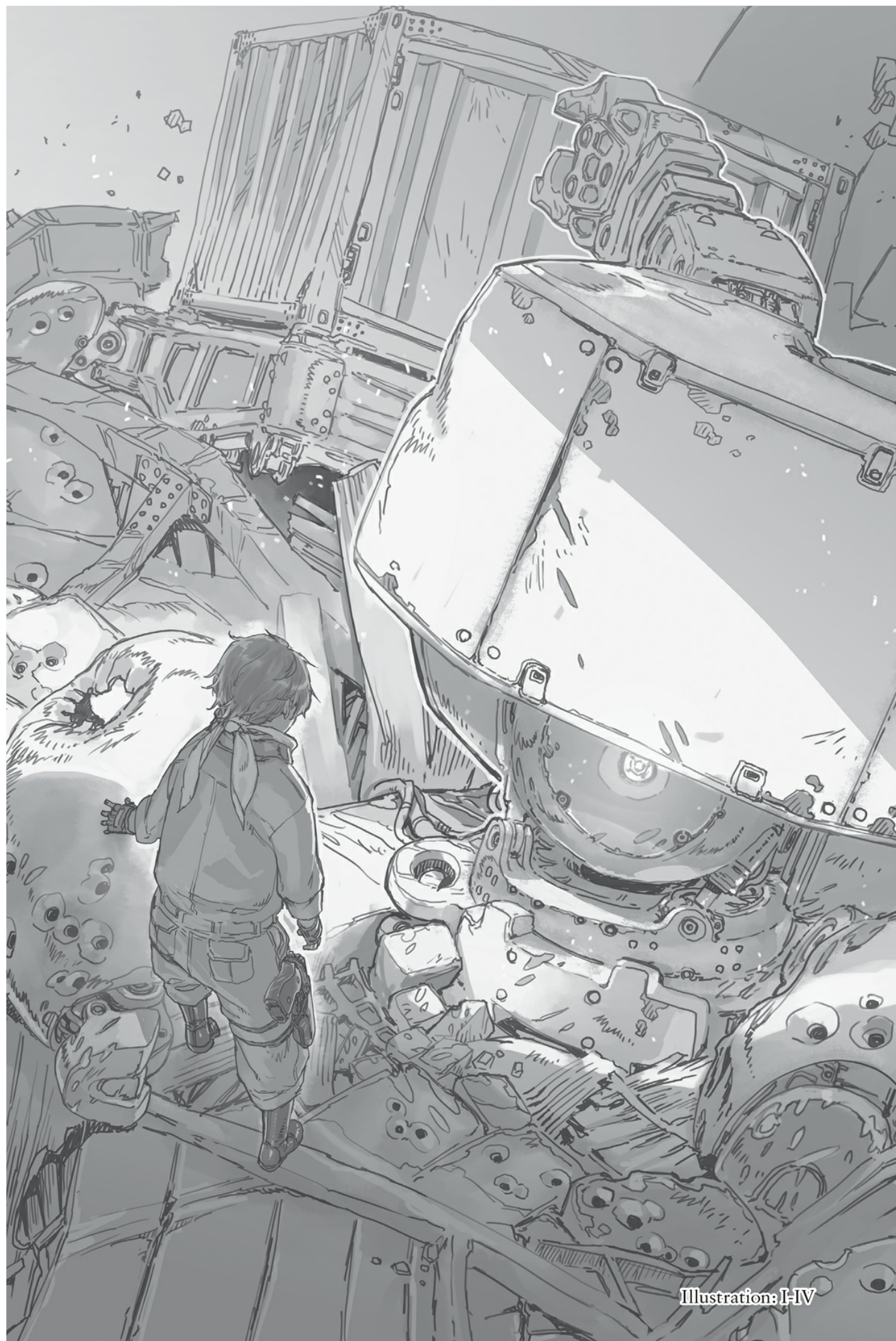


Illustration: I-IV

“...You’re still alive?” Shin asked in surprise.

It felt like the Scavenger’s optical sensor suddenly swerved to look at him. Shin unconsciously reached out to it, touching its sooty body. It had a thin metallic surface that was both unarmed and unarmored.

The fact that he’d asked a cold, lifeless garbage-collecting device a question like that was probably a product of Shin’s heart being as weak as it was in that moment. Scavengers had no personalities. The Republic could only produce an artificial intelligence that was too feeble to handle autonomous combat. Instead, they cast the Eighty-Six out into the field of battle to act like disposable parts.

So no matter what he said, this machine—this *thing* couldn’t really understand. The only thing it could do was obey simple verbal commands. And even knowing this, he kept on speaking.

“There’s no one left. The squadron, all your friends, they’re all dead. Will you go back with me anyway...?”

Shin had to experience walking back to base completely on his own over and over. But even so... No, for that exact reason, he didn’t want to go through it again. Shin’s weak heart spurred him to cling to this connection.

3

“I see. But that’s just the way it is. That’s the fate of the Eighty-Six.”

Upon hearing from Shin, the sole survivor, that the rest of his squadron had been wiped out, the chief of the maintenance crew, Touka Keisha, sighed. She was a mixed Sapphira with golden hair and sky-blue eyes. She wore coveralls that had the constant scent of machine oil on it, which clashed with the fair, beautiful features of her face.

Brushing a lock of hair back, she turned to the rear of the hangar, where containers were lined up. Every one of them was emblazoned with the Republic’s five-hued flag, which by now felt like a despicable symbol to her. She was appalled by the fact that after all the Republic had done, they still had the

nerve to claim that their national policy was one of freedom, equality, brotherhood, justice, and nobility.

Those fools could never hope to embody such values while oppressing the Eighty-Six, whom they didn't even consider human.

"It wasn't on time for this operation, but the order for that armament finally got approved. There's still a surplus from when they were initially produced, so they sent us plenty of spares. Use them in your next squadron."

High-frequency blades. Touka had even forgotten they existed until the taciturn boy by her side found them in the Juggernaut's manual and asked her about them. They were optional armaments that could be placed on the grappling arms instead of the 12.7 mm heavy machine guns.

They had enough force to even cut into the armor of the Dinosauria, the toughest and largest of all observed Legion types, like it was made of butter. But in the end, they were only swords. Anachronistic, absurd melee weapons. Utterly useless in a battlefield where heavy machine guns and tank turrets, which could fire projectiles several kilometers away, reigned supreme.

Any weapon, no matter how potent, was useless unless it hit the enemy. And so no Eighty-Six used this weapon, which required sprinting through gunfire and bombardment to close in on the enemy. They were seen as useless weight and nothing more.

As a result, Touka didn't know of any Processors who used them, and when the Handler received the request to order them, their reaction went from mocking to outright eerie disgust. Apparently, they questioned if the one who asked for it had completely lost his mind.

Touka herself tried to talk Shin out of it, but he insisted, and she had to give in. After all, he would be the one to put his life on the line in battle with this weapon. As a member of the maintenance crew, Touka didn't have the right to change his mind.

She could only hope that stubbornness didn't stem from desperation. She couldn't remember him looking her in the eye even once since he was stationed here. And so as she tried to meet his lowered gaze, she continued her words.

“Just don’t do anything reckless. You’re the only one who survived, so you should stay alive for as long as you can. In your next squadron and the one after that, too.”

“ ... ”

Shin remained silent. He was ten years younger than Touka, and he already lacked emotion to an extent one would never imagine from a boy in his early teens. Despite Touka somehow managing to smile at him, he didn’t return the gesture. Instead, he walked away from the container of high-frequency blades to another corner of the hangar.

“...Can you fix this?” he asked in a dry voice, his gaze set on a heavily damaged, old-model Scavenger.

Its legs were in critical condition, and it could hardly move. She was shocked when he’d towed it back to base with his Juggernaut. Even if the battle was over, he’d returned with it from the depths of the contested zones, where the Legion could be hiding anywhere. And it was just a Scavenger, a burden, an unnecessary drone that wasn’t even worth protecting.

What spurred him to perform such an insane act? Everyone there had the feeling that they understood, and so neither Touka nor the rest of the maintenance crew said anything.

“Well...” Touka trailed off and shrugged.

Normally, repairing a Scavenger would be put off, but they didn’t have any Juggernauts to fix that day.

“Well, yes. If it’s just patching up its legs, it’s not a problem. Its core unit isn’t damaged, so we can probably fix it in no time. Right, we’ll have it ready today... Maybe tomorrow. That’s all thanks to you bringing it back... Good job.”

“ ... ”

Touka herself thought her attempt at cheering him up came across as unnatural, and Shin didn’t say anything. In his place, the Scavenger sitting in the empty hangar beeped out a strange, electronic “*Pi*.”

The frontline bases’ power supply was operated from far behind the

Republic's fortress walls. The Republic upheld a blackout during nighttime. It was done to ensure the base wasn't subjected to night raids from the Legion and also to avoid wasting energy on subhuman pigs.

To the Republic's citizens, the Eighty-Six were just disposable tools used in the name of their national defense. Anything that wasn't necessary for combat, be it for comfort or recreational purposes, or any kind of indulgence that would help keep up morale, wasn't delivered to the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

Slightly before the lights went out, Touka patrolled the base in place of the dead captain. She stopped in the hangar, which was empty after the crew finished servicing Shin's Juggernaut and the Scavenger.

Normally, Scavengers spent the night in a designated waiting area near the base's automatic factory. But despite that, the Scavenger's large, squarish form was still visible in a corner of the closed hangar. Touka didn't really mind seeing it there. Scavengers were tools produced and used by the Republic. She didn't know and honestly didn't care what programming operated them or how they decided how to act. After all, even if the Eighty-Six could decide the scavengers' work orders or the range they operated in, they didn't have authority to assign them tasks.

But then she saw Shin huddled next to its stained body, asleep. He was there even though the maintenance crew had told him to get some rest. Looking closely, she saw he had his thin blanket from his room, so apparently, he had returned to the barracks once. But then why was he sleeping here in the hangar? It wasn't a place one should spend the night in.

She reached out to him, thinking to shake him awake, but then she came to a realization and bit her lip.

The barracks. It was now empty of all the squad mates who'd been there until just the previous day, and he probably didn't want to sleep there by himself. It would be going back to a place that served as a reminder that everyone but him had passed away.

So he'd gone to the hangar. A place that would always be empty at night. Or maybe...

The boy sat in place, asleep and huddled against the cold body of the

Scavenger, which was now in stasis mode.

To Touka, he looked like a small child clinging to a stray puppy he'd found.

4

The Republic treated the Eighty-Six like machine parts, but even they knew better than to give combat orders to a squadron that had been reduced to a single Juggernaut. And so for the period until a new squadron was assigned, the Processor for that single Juggernaut—Shin—was left with nothing to do.

For the first few days, he hung around the maintenance crew since he'd decided that handling simple repairs for his rig wouldn't be a bad skill to learn.

But then the Juggernauts for the next squadron showed up, and the maintenance crew became too busy with tuning and applying final touches to them. These were, after all, the Processors' partners, which would function as their weapons and lifelines. So even if the Processors weren't there yet, they couldn't cut corners.

Touka told Shin to think of this as a vacation and just relax, but doing nothing made him restless. And so as a way of distracting himself, Shin went on a walk and stopped by an abandoned Republic base a good distance away.

Early on in the Legion War, the Republic military was wiped out, and the Republic evacuated into the eighty-five administrative Sectors. This base was abandoned at the time and overrun by lush foliage. Roosters that had long forgotten their fear and deference toward humans strutted around like they owned the place. Shin went through a gate that past Eighty-Six had busted open, and he entered the base's concrete building.

He walked down the corridor that was by now familiar to him, with mice squeaking and skittering away as they fled from his approach. The place had been abandoned, but it served as a useful site for collecting preserved foods and small firearms... Places like these were where the Eighty-Six obtained pistols and rifles, which they were usually forbidden from possessing. But since the Republic soldiers didn't do their jobs properly, they never checked or knew about this clear transgression.

Of course, the piles of rations had been whittled down after years of the war, but Shin soon found the ammunition box he was looking for and made to drag it out of its corner. But just then, he heard something metallic and heavy—no lighter than ten tonnes—noisily step through the warehouse.

“...?!”

Shin held his breath nervously and spun around. This had never happened before—the Legion never sneaked up on him or took him from behind like that! He slipped on the strap of his assault rifle and grasped its grip. He loaded the first bullet and prepared to aim the weapon...

...when he recalled that the Legion didn’t make footsteps.

Their high-fidelity actuators and shock absorbers allowed even Dinosauria, with their colossal weight of over one hundred tonnes, to move with the faint fluttering sound of bones rubbing against one another. In which case, the thing behind him...the thing he saw as he turned around was...

“Pi.”

...a charred, old-style Juggernaut.

“...”

An awkward silence settled over the place as the boy and the machine gawked at each other in the abandoned warehouse. Shin stood frozen and unsure of how to react as he stared into the round optical sensor.

He felt both relieved and tired all at once as he heaved a sigh.

“It’s you.”

The Scavenger he’d found and brought back from the last battle. It wobbled over to him with loud, clumsy footsteps, but Shin knew it couldn’t possibly answer him.

“There’s no sortie today, so you’re not ordered to follow me around. What are you doing here?”

“Pi.”

Scavengers weren’t equipped with a verbal-output feature, but apparently,

that electronic beeping was its way of answering. It'd followed him here while disregarding its garbage-collection duties.

It turned its optical sensor about, looking restlessly around the warehouse with artificial yet somehow adorable movements, before settling its gaze on the crate of pistol bullets Shin had dropped when he'd held up his assault rifle. It then extended its crane arm, capable of picking up heavy 57 mm shells, and lifted the ammunition crate with ease.

The Scavengers' role was to pick up shell fragments and machine wreckage from the battlefield and return them for recycling in the base's automatic factory. Shin nearly raised his hand to stop it, but he paused halfway through and looked up at the large machine.

Apparently, it was thinking of bringing the crate back.

"Pi!"

It put the crate into its container with what felt like an enthusiastic, humorous sequence of movements.

"...Heh." Shin was smiling before he knew it.

As he gazed into the optical sensor, he chuckled. The laughter just bubbled up within him, and as he let it surface, Shin wondered—how long had it been since the last time he'd laughed? It felt like it had been an eternity.

As he laughed aloud, he felt the corners of his eyes grow hot, and yet he pretended not to notice all the other emotions that wouldn't run down his cheeks.

The Scavenger gazed at him wordlessly, like a faithful hound—which, again, made sense since it didn't have a verbal-output feature—and Shin patted his hand on the machine's flank, as one might do to a dog or a horse.

"If you're going to carry stuff, I've got a lot of things I need to bring back. Help me out for a while."

"Pi!"

As emotionless as it was, the Scavenger seemed to nod happily. Or at least, it moved its body up and down in an approximation of a nod. And once again,

without him even noticing it, Shin curled his lips into a smile.

On top of the pistol and assault-rifle ammunition and spare parts, Shin stocked up on living ware, emergency rations, and canned food. Shin's small body could only carry so much, but his reliable Scavenger loaded them into its container.

Shin returned to base while moving a bit more slowly so as to keep up with the sluggish Scavenger. He made his way back feeling slightly better than he did when he left, and he found Touka waiting for him in front of the hangar.

Seeing her fair features contorted in anger, Shin pursed his lips, feeling a bad premonition settle in. It looked like the Scavenger following him was shivering with fear somehow. He opened his canopy, and once he touched down on the ground, Touka parted her lips. Her pale features were stern, frightening, and indignant.

"Your change-of-ward order just came in."

5

Each ward and internment camp in the Eighty-Sixth Sector was separated by antipersonnel and anti-tank minefields. Needless to say, the Eighty-Six generally weren't allowed to move outside the wards they were appointed to, to say nothing of entering the eighty-five administrative Sectors. The only means of transportation between them were military transports that crossed the hundred kilometers from the eighty-five Sectors. The Legion had aerial superiority over the contested zones thanks to the Eintagsfliege and the Stachelschwein, and so the Republic's unsightly metallic birds could only fly in their own limited airspace.

The transport plane's four jet engines were currently turned off, and the hatch for its hold was hanging open. Shin was guided onto the plane by the Republic officer in charge of the flight.

He hardly had any personal belongings to take with him. He'd kept the assault rifle he carried for self-defense and the pistol he carried for suicide purposes, as well as the aluminum grave markers, which had only piled up since his first

squadron, hidden in his Juggernaut. That way, they wouldn't be confiscated.

On paper, the Processors were only Juggernaut parts, and so they and their units were treated as a set during transports. Usually, the planes carried multiple Juggernauts, but this time, the transport's hold was excessively empty.

As he got to the ramp, Touka and the rest of the maintenance crew came to see him off. He bowed his head without looking them in the eye. Whether the crew treated him cordially like Touka did or scorned him as a god of death like others did, he would bid them farewell just the same once he changed wards and would likely never see them again.

He was used to the fact that he'd say good-bye and likely never find out if they went on to live or die. Just like he was used to being carried to his next battlefield in an unusually spacious cargo area.

Regardless of if people scorned him or were kind to him, nothing ever really changed. He'd be all alone in the end just the same.

He pursed his lips tightly. The memories of the last few days he spent here surfaced in his mind, but he silenced them. Scavengers were autonomous machines attached to each base, and just like the maintenance crew, they were considered as the property of the base. They couldn't move outside their assigned wards.

So it couldn't come along.

As Shin sat in the cargo hold, a Republic officer confirmed the Juggernaut was fixed in place. Neither of them spared the other a look. As weak as its armor was, the Juggernaut weighed over ten tonnes. Letting an amateur Processor handle its coupling could lead to it being poorly attached. If it came loose, it could disturb the plane's center of gravity during takeoff. As such, the Eighty-Six weren't trusted to handle that.

Of course, if the Eighty-Six were to do it intentionally, they'd be going down with the plane, but they were fated to die on the battlefield either way. Some were satisfied just taking some Republic soldiers down with them, so a few likely considered doing that. Meaning even the Republic soldiers, who hardly ever did their job, had to be diligent when it came to this.

The officer then raised his head and knit his brows, jerking his chin toward the open hatch behind them.

“—Hey. You’re not thinking of taking that thing along, are you?”

“...?”

Turning around, Shin saw a Scavenger standing there, its massive body blocking off the sunlight. It was an old model with soot-covered plating, but its legs alone were new. The round lens of its optical sensor flickered as if blinking.

It was that Scavenger.

“*Pi.*”

“...Why?”

As mentioned, Scavengers were considered the property of their base and couldn’t move to other bases. So they couldn’t follow any squadrons or Processors who were being reorganized.

As Shin gazed at it, confused, the Scavenger climbed onto the ramp and folded its four legs in one of the hold’s corners, as if making a statement that it wouldn’t move. It ignored the officer, who’d ordered it to stop and now angrily turned on Shin.

“What orders did you give it...? Don’t do anything suspicious, you damn Eighty-Six. Tell it to get off.”

But Shin was at as much of a loss as the officer was. He...or rather, the Eighty-Six as a whole didn’t have any authority over the Scavengers to begin with. And so Shin kept his gaze moving between the angry officer and the seated Scavenger.

Touka peered into the plane and said with a mocking smile, “Oh, but I thought these Scavengers were the product of your great Republic’s cutting-edge technology?”

The officer glared at her venomously as Touka raised her chin and laughed. Her blue eyes were narrowed elegantly, and her naturally red lips were curled into a smirk.

A sweet, arrogant smirk.

“I mean, we subhuman pigs could operate your superior machines. These drones were made by the most advanced technology developed by the Republic’s people, members of the superior species. Surely, you could change any orders we filthy Eighty-Six gave it. It’d be easy enough for you...right?”

Go ahead, she goaded him. Do it yourself.

“Ugh...” The officer fell silent, his face going red with humiliation and anger.

He couldn’t do it. He didn’t have that kind of authority. And maybe he even lacked the knowledge and techniques to handle a Scavenger that was acting irregularly.

But admitting he was powerless and helpless in front of Eighty-Six? In front of subhuman pigs? His pride wouldn’t allow it.

“...Fine. Do whatever you want.”

Shin looked up at the officer in surprise, who didn’t look back at him. The man bitterly approached the Scavenger and began fixing it in place, too. As the Scavenger flickered its optical sensor at the same tempo a dog might wag its tail happily with, Touka regarded Shin with a soft smile and waved good-bye.

The officer returned to the transport plane’s cockpit, leaving the Juggernaut, the child soldier who served as its Processor unit, and the Scavenger behind in the hold. A military aircraft’s hold could ferry people, but no Republic soldier wanted to share a room with an Eighty-Six.

“There’s been a change in the cargo weight. Recalculate it,” he told the copilot bitterly without sparing him a glance.

“Roger that.”

Just thinking back to that argument in the hold pissed him off.

“Those pigs, I swear to God. Fucking animals making my job harder...”

This plane could easily carry an extra ten tonnes without a problem, but that wasn’t to say it didn’t add extra work.

“This is why I can’t stand Eighty-Six. They just keep complicating our job for no reason. Those imbeciles don’t know how hard we humans work. Goddamn pigs. Livestock.”

As the officer muttered in irritation, the copilot threw a sidelong glance at him.

“You don’t have to say it over and over; we all know they’re pigs in human form... Listening to you is getting annoying,” he said.

“I know,” the officer replied ruefully, contrary to his words.

Yes, he knew, but if he didn’t say this, he wouldn’t calm down. The top brass of the military. His colleagues. The irresponsible Handlers. The ignorant citizens. His homeland had decided that the Eighty-Six were pigs in human form. Lowly, stupid, and savage. Subhumans that were an evolutionary cul-de-sac. He had to think of them that way.

God dammit, he mouthed under his breath.

He couldn’t keep up this job if he didn’t think that way. His thoughts wandered back to the child soldier. A boy in his early teens, far too young to be a soldier. And the expression he made the moment he gave him permission to keep the Scavenger on board.

He’s just a weapon’s component. Why couldn’t he just act the part and keep his emotions dead?

It was the expression of a small child, the kind you could see anywhere.

The expression of a small boy who’d been told he could keep the puppy he’d found and raised in secret.



— 311 —

Varlet—Extra

Even after reactivating the Para-RAID, there were no Resonance targets to communicate with. His Juggernaut's feeble radar couldn't detect any nearby consort units.

Another squadron wiped out.

Throwing the radio, which only sputtered out static noise, into his cockpit, Shin leaned his back against his unit's armor and sighed. The captain and the squad members under him were all gone.

The battlefield he was on was an abandoned, desolate autumn pasture. The Legion had retreated, and Shin was left all alone beneath a sky dyed with the particular hues of blue that were unique to the fall. The wind blew on, indifferent to the battle that'd just taken place and the human lives it'd claimed. The needlessly clear azure sky hung above him, the petals of flowers he didn't know the names of fluttering through them.

Having turned twelve, Shin had finally been charged with being a squadron's vice captain. It was a squadron without any veterans. And as always, they were all wiped out, with him being the sole survivor...

...or not.

"You're still here," Shin said, turning his eyes to the old-model Scavenger tottering loudly toward him.

"Pi."

Perhaps Shin was lucky, because for how old it was, it had apparently been graced with some learning ability. This admirable Scavenger was better at surviving battles than its peers. And this was despite the fact that it always followed Shin closely, even as he engaged the Legion in melee combat with his high-frequency blades or when he charged deep into enemy lines to break their formations.

"They'll probably be transferring me. Are you going to follow me again?"

“Pi.”

“That right?”

Apparently, it was.

It went without saying, but Touka wasn't in this ward. Which meant this time, he'd have to talk the Republic soldiers into letting Fido come along, Shin thought idly. And it didn't stop there. He'd have to care for a lot of things on his own from now on.

Processors eventually leave him and die. And the maintenance crew stays behind as he bids them farewell. So if he was going to survive, he couldn't rely on anyone else. He'd have to handle it all on his own—

“Pi.”

“Mm.”

Shin realized the Scavenger was staring at him. Its round optical sensor wasn't flickering. It was observing him thoughtfully, its fuselage leaned slightly forward, like an intelligent dog.

Somehow, that gesture made it look concerned about Shin. Even though a garbage-collecting machine made by the Republic couldn't possibly have any advanced functions like thoughts and emotions.

But just as that thought crossed Shin's mind, it lifted both of its crane arms up toward the sky and started waving them left and right. It then bent the joints connecting its legs to its body one after another, rocking its ten-tonne form to the same rhythm it was moving its arms in.

“...”

It was...dancing. Shin watched the Scavenger's odd, unexpected motions with blank amazement for a moment before he burst out laughing. Between this, how it'd followed him to help him carry supplies, and how it'd basically forced itself onto the transport plane...

“You're one weird guy, you know that?”

Even though it's just a machine that can't possibly be capable of emotion.

The Scavenger's optical sensor peered at him again, as if asking if he'd cheered up.

"I guess I can't just call you *you* all the time," Shin said, gazing back at it. "It'd be confusing."

"Pi?"

"Do you have a name...? No, I guess you don't. Then how about...?"

Even the Republic, which stripped the Eighty-Six of their original, human names, at least used numbers to manage them. Shin mulled over it for a moment, and then a name came to mind. He said it aloud without overthinking it.

He couldn't recall when he'd heard of it anymore, but apparently, it was a name one would give to a dog. And for some reason, it felt nostalgic. Shin didn't remember why that was the case, either.

"Fido. I'll call you Fido."

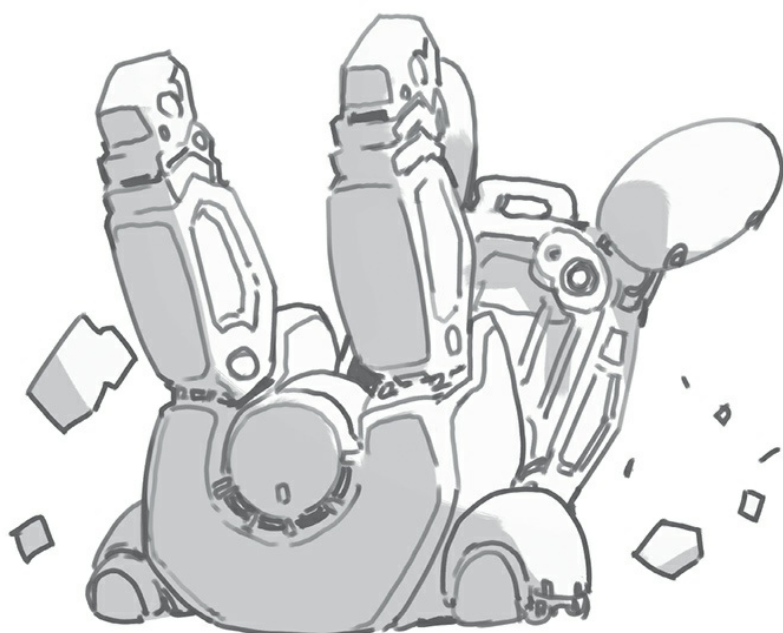
"Pi...!"

The Scavenger—Fido—flickered its optical sensor like it was overcome with emotion.

Apparently, it liked the name. It shook its crane arms and body again, this time in larger motions, dancing around with noisy footsteps. It danced so cheerily that it almost looked like imaginary flowers or hearts might start blowing around it. Shin watched it frolic with a sardonic smile.

"Once you're done dancing, let's get back to base. The head mechanic might get worried if we're late."

"Pi!"



Appendix

In addition to the Processors and combatants, the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package's headquarters at the Federacy's Rüstkammer base housed a large number of soldiers and military personnel. One of those personnel's duties was bringing in supplies, but Shin stopped in his tracks when he saw a familiar, if clumsy large silhouette helping them out.

Unlike the Eighty-Sixth Sector's frontline bases and the western front's 177th Armored Division's bases, which were adjacent to the battlefield, Rüstkammer was far from the front lines. This meant there was no need to collect materials from the field after battles.

This did make Shin wonder what Fido did when there were no operations—in other words, when it had nothing else to do.

Unlike the other Scavengers, which the Federacy had made in its image, Fido still had its original core unit, which was made in the Republic. Its programmed duty should have been the same as it was back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. But somehow, Fido handled itself with surprising flexibility.

Well, maybe it wasn't all that surprising. Even back then, Fido would ignore the orders of Republic soldiers and disregarded its assigned combat sectors. It kept boarding transport flights, which was as flexible and free-acting as a Scavenger could be.

Shin had already stopped asking himself what kind of programming was running inside that core. He did think that even if Scavengers had learning capabilities, everything had its limits, but he'd long since concluded that this wasn't a question he should be brooding over.

After unloading a container full of vegetables or some such, Fido turned to face the supply personnel.

"Pi!"

"Oh, thanks for the help, as always... And look, your owner just showed up."

"Pi."

As Fido's optical sensor flickered enthusiastically, Grethe approached, regarding it with a smile as her high heels clicked against the floor. The truck that'd brought in the food supplies drove off, and in its place, a trailer full of ammunition rolled in. Watching's Fido reaction as Shin came closer, Grethe parted her red lips.

"...We collected a few of that one's models when we offered aid to the Republic."

Shin glanced at Grethe, who didn't look back at him.

"There's a handful of other Barrett units that have been operating for a similar number of years as that one, but none of them are as smart. Stubborn, clumsy...and it won't do anything except obey its initial orders."

Fido prioritized resupplying a particular Eighty-Six. And to that end, it would leave any bases it was assigned to and even learned new orders, like gathering pieces of the war dead's rigs or their Personal Marks. The only thing Fido didn't do was collect dead soldiers' remains. Perhaps it had some strict prohibition on doing so placed on it.

"Really," Shin said indifferently.

"Doesn't it interest you?" Grethe raised an eyebrow. "The Scavenger that's been by your side all this time is different from the others."

"Why didn't you try analyzing it?"

"Als are outside my area of expertise." She shrugged. "If it can't fight...and especially if it's not a Feldreß, I don't care that much."

Fido's memory regions still contained records of Shin...and all the rest of the Spearhead squadron's dead members. So apparently, to that end, they hadn't needlessly messed with Fido's core unit when they put it inside a Federacy unit.

After pausing for thought, Shin said:

"I knew Fido wasn't like the other Scavengers long before you pointed it out. Even back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector's frontline bases, Fido was different from the others, too... And besides," Shin appended, gazing into the violet eyes fixed on him, "if someone told you the dog you picked up years ago was actually a

wolf all along, you wouldn't mind after all this time, would you?"

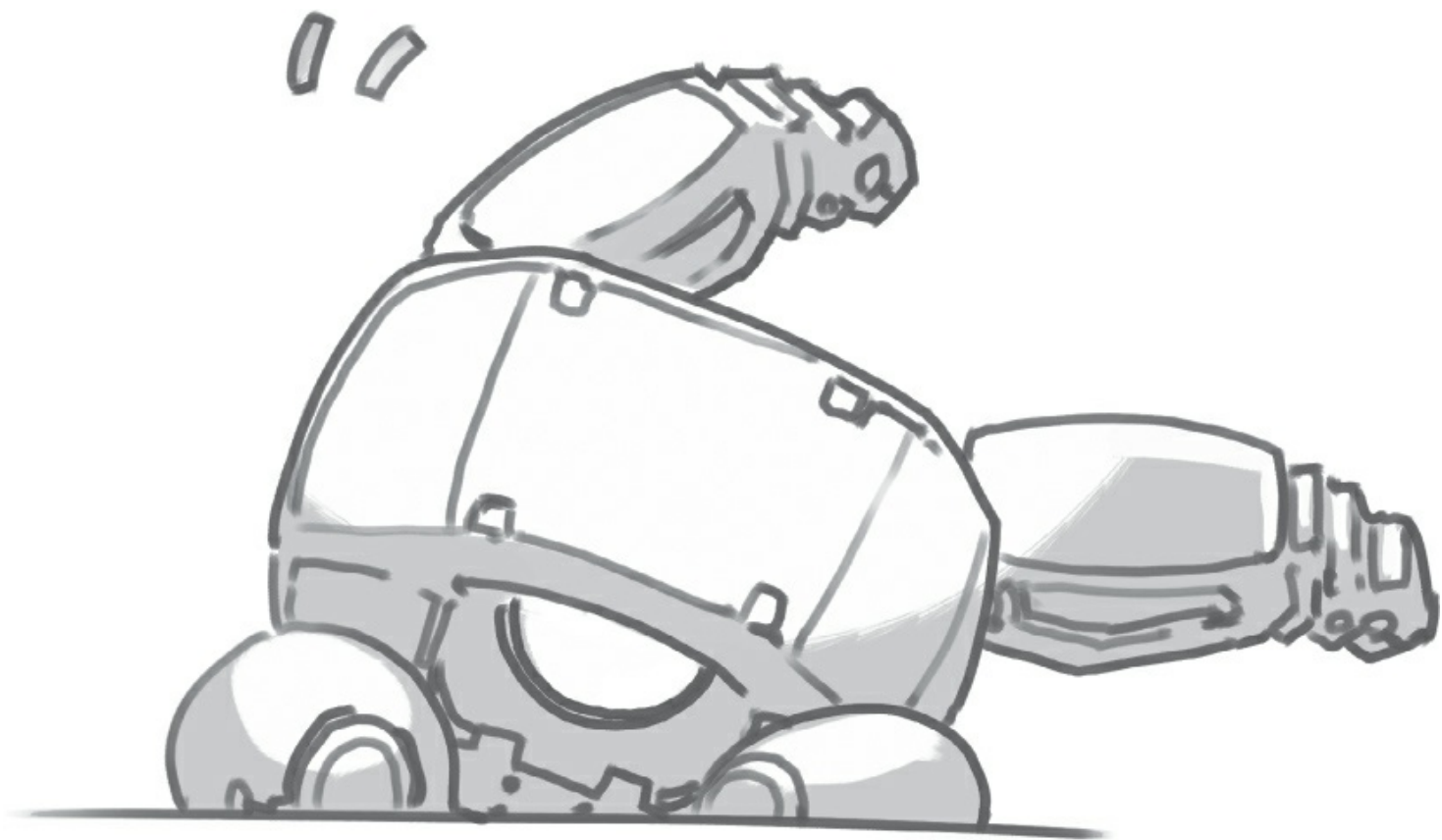
If it still cherished you. If it still stayed by your side, after all this time.

"I suppose I wouldn't." Grethe smiled.

"Even if he isn't a Scavenger, I don't care. He's still..."

Shin trailed off, throwing a glance at Fido. Noticing this, Fido waved its crane arms at him, and Shin felt his lips slacken into a smile.

"He's still with me, after all."



[EIGHTY- SIX]

Countless souls were claimed.
But no deaths were recorded.

These are the fragmental stories that turned the boy
into a Reaper...



《《《 FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY

< Brand >

CHAPTER 4

FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY: BRAND

3

“—Good work out there, *Vice Captain* Nouzen.”

Having stopped his Juggernaut at its designated spot at the hangar, Shin heard a voice call out to him. Turning around, he found himself faced with a blond young man with stiff hair, who greeted him with a smile.

“Captain Nunat.”

“Call me Eijyu... Heh, I keep telling you that, but you never listen. You’re stubborn.”

Laughing loudly, this squad captain, Captain Eijyu Nunat, approached Shin. He stood a head taller than him and had cheerful red eyes.

“You really gave them hell out there today. Thanks to you, both me and the rest of the squad were saved.”

“I just told you how the enemy’s going to move.”

“That’s more than enough. Just the fact that they can’t take us by surprise is a lot.”

With that said, Eijyu’s smile deepened. His crimson eyes—the color of the setting sun—were the shade unique to the Spinel.

“You did good by telling me about it. We’d have figured it out eventually when we Resonated with you, but it still took courage to step up and say it. Thank you.”

He believed him.

“...No.” Shin shook his head.

It really wasn't anything major. Like Eijyu just said, everyone would have found out when they Resonated with him enough times.

“Just take the compliment,” Eijyu said, cracking an ironic smile. “What, are you the type that gets antsy when someone thanks or praises them?”

“...”

This isn't about “antsy.”

This wasn't anything to be thankful about, so it didn't feel right when people did thank him. Seeing that Shin was adamant about not meeting his gaze, Eijyu deepened his ironic smile as he changed the subject.

“...Speaking of, it's almost a year since you've been sent into the battlefield, right?”

Shin looked at him blankly, unsure as to what he was getting at. This prompted Eijyu to laugh, having apparently achieved his desired result.

“Then it's about time you think of a Personal Name, isn't it? And a Personal Mark! You've got to come up with those. And you know what? I'll think of one for you!”

“...Oh...”

Contrary to Eijyu, who was exceedingly excited about this even though this wasn't about him at all, Shin let out this disinterested utterance.

Processors who survived over a year in the battlefield changed the call signs they used during operations. They went from a call sign consisting of their platoon number and a number to a unique Personal Name. Accordingly, their unit was emblazoned not with their call sign but a Personal Mark.

This was a custom here in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, since most Eighty-Six tended to die within their first year of service. Of course, it wasn't registered in the Republic's official documents, but it was tolerated for the most part. Both the Handlers and their superior officers cared little for whatever customs these pigs in human form had.

“Have you thought of something? Like, you know, something that feels right

as a name?”

“It’s all just signifiers for the sake of identification. Be it names or call signs or internment numbers,” Shin said, almost huffing the words out in displeasure.

Hearing this, Eijyu narrowed his eyes.

“Do you hate your name, Shin?”

“...”

For a moment, a voice and a pair of eyes surfaced in his mind in vivid clarity.

Shin. Sin. It’s your fault. It’s all your fault.

“...Not really,” he said, his voice cracking a bit.

He could tell that his words didn’t give a very confident impression, so Shin lowered his gaze. He could just barely hear the sound of his fists clenching and his nails digging into his skin. Eijyu seemed to pretend to not have noticed that.

“Well, if you don’t have any preferences, I’ll come up with something. Lemme think...” He paused for thought and then raised his index finger, indicating that he’d struck on an idea. “How about Báleygr? It’s a god’s pseudonym. A god of war who guides an army of dead warriors and has burning eyes. It fits you like a glove. You’re as strong as a god or a monster, and you have that promise you told me about...and you’ve got pretty red eyes, after all.”

As Shin stared at him, Eijyu grinned again boastfully. Like he’d just pulled a successful prank on a younger brother. Shin flusteredly averted his gaze. He couldn’t wish for someone to treat him like this. It always reminded him of a person he mustn’t remember. Even though he couldn’t recall his face, or smile, or really anything about him anymore.

“...It doesn’t suit me.”

“You think? I mean, if you’re gonna have a Personal Name, you might as well have a cool one. After all”—Eijyu shrugged as Shin raised his eyes to look at him again—“it’s as you said. It’s just a signifier for identification. It’s a game of pretend that’s only good for making you feel better.”

Watching his short vice captain leave the hangar, Eijyu turned his eyes to the head of the maintenance team, who stood a short distance away.

“We’ll be giving you more work, though, Head Mechanic Seiya.”

“Maintenance and repair are our responsibilities, so it’s not like I mind... But, Eijyu—”

The two of them were in the same school as kids. Seiya directed his bitter gaze at him from afar. He had gold hair that bordered on silver, and faint-violet eyes, the symbol of the bloodline of an immigrant from their northern neighbor.

“—I’m surprised you care so much for that creepy kid.”

“Did something happen?” Eijyu asked.

“How many died today? Ever since he showed up?”

“Oh...” Eijyu sighed.

That again.

Shin joined this squadron two months ago and immediately became vice captain. The chain of command in the Eighty-Sixth Sector was decided only by one’s martial prowess, and there were already eerie rumors going around about this red-eyed boy.

“It’s probably not his fault.” Eijyu wrote Seiya’s suggestion off.

“I dunno about that. There’s that thing with him...and they say that of all the squadrons he’s been in, he’s always the last one alive.”

Eijyu frowned. He knew this best friend of his wasn’t a bad guy, but there was a pretty big gap between how he treated those he considered friends and how he treated everyone else. He cared for his friends a great deal, which made him adamantly reject anything that might hurt them. Eijyu knew this, but...

“Well, that part’s probably true. That boy, he...”

Eijyu moved his eyes in the direction of the barracks, where Shin’s room was behind the hangar’s wall. Shin spent the majority of his free time alone in that room. Eijyu never saw him chat with other kids his age.

“He doesn’t call people by their names. He has that promise of his, so I don’t think he doesn’t want to remember...but he probably wants to keep some

distance from people.”

Between himself and these soldiers who are destined to die. This was an attitude all Name Bearers—Eighty-Six who had lived long enough to earn a Personal Mark—adopted at one point or another. Even Eijyu knew how that felt.

Because the more attached you are to someone, the more it hurts when you lose them.

Name Bearers like Eijyu have lost more people than their heart can possibly take. Every year, new Processors enlist to this battlefield, and only one in a thousand of them survives. But that’s exactly why—

“That’s not his fault.”

The Eighty-Six die. Anyone and everyone can die in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, much too easily and without a hint of fanfare. And no one in particular is to blame for that.

“Eijyu—”

“Cassandra was a prophet of ruin whose prophecies were all true. But that didn’t mean...”

...that one had to see the prophet as the cause for the catastrophe they foresaw. Cataclysms can be inevitable, but human society has a tendency to look for a factor they can blame.

Just like how the Republic pinned the blame for their defeat in the war on the Eighty-Six and cast them out into the battlefield.

“Even though Cassandra never wanted those catastrophes to come, much less beckoned them.”

2

“...That’s what Eijyu says. But what are you, really? A prophet or a plague-bringer?”

Shin had beaten the former vice captain down, despite him being both older

and physically larger than him. No one could match him when it came to fighting the Legion. But on the other hand, he had a tendency to push his Juggernaut way over the limits of its performance. This meant he was also at the top of his squad when it came to exhausting and damaging his rig.

He'd break his Juggernaut in spectacular fashion on every single mission, and recently, the repairs hadn't been able to keep with the rate he wrecked units. The only solution was to set aside a spare specifically for him and constantly alternate between it and his main unit.

And yet somehow, he was never majorly injured. Seiya stared into his pale face, wondering if there was even blood pumping through his veins, as Shin looked back at him. His crimson gaze was bereft of emotion in a way the eyes of a boy in his early teens shouldn't be.

"I don't know."

"What did you just say?"

"Cassandra herself couldn't tell, either. How am I supposed to know if what I see is an avoidable future or if I'm just imagining catastrophes and willing them into existence?"

Shin couldn't tell if he was a god of pestilence, either.

"...You—" Seiya growled in an animalistic way, narrowing his faint-violet eyes.

"I just don't want to die. Otherwise, I wouldn't have told the captain or anyone else about this... It's not that I like being called a haunted monster."

"..."

Shin spoke with an unfeeling voice, without a hint of enthusiasm or hatred. Unsure of how to interpret Shin's words, Seiya fell silent for a moment. Shin looked down at his Juggernaut, which had all its parts exchanged and had a new suspension system installed, and said:

"Can I make a request, Head Mechanic?"

Seiya cocked an eyebrow. He was both surprised and suspicious. Shin knew he hated him, and he never spoke to him about anything except things relating to his job. And now he was asking for something?

“Depends on what it is. Shoot.”

“Could you teach me how to lift a Juggernaut’s limiters? The engine, control system, maneuvering. Anything that has a limiter placed on it.”

“Who told you?” Seiya asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Second Lieutenant Karen. The mechanic in charge of my Juggernaut.”

“...I’ll kick that idiot’s ass tomorrow.”

Being a chatterbox was fine, but that particular member of the maintenance crew had a horrible tendency to blabber about things they shouldn’t. Seiya sighed and continued speaking with that displeased expression.

“You do know what those safety limiters are there for, right? This isn’t some comic or cartoon where the robot powers up when you lift its limiters. It’s not a nice, convenient little feature you have on your rig. The limiters are there because they’re necessary. Even with the current settings, piloting that thing places a heavy enough burden on a kid like you.”

The Juggernaut’s mobility was by no means high, but its buffering system was even worse. It was slower than the Löwe, the Grauwolf, and even the Dinosauria—the strongest but rarest of the Legion types—but its movements were unbelievably noisy...and the buffering system did little to absorb the shock, meaning each step jolted the pilot.

“I’m sure you’ve seen people get broken by piloting this thing in your time here. What, you think you’re special or something just because you almost survived for a year?”

“No.” Shin shook his head coolly.

If nothing else, his emotionless face didn’t seem to have any of the sense of invincibility that kids his age tended to have. He simply spoke on, unfaltering.

“But it’s necessary. Without faster reaction times and my unit being able to make more complicated jumps, using the high-frequency blade...using melee weapons is rough.”

“Then just don’t use melee weapons that give the maintenance team extra work.”

Seiya neglected to mention that these were weapons used exclusively by suicidal Processors. The high-frequency blade was powerful, for sure, but its range—or rather, its reach—was extremely short, making it a very risky weapon. But Shin used it knowingly, so it wasn't Seiya's place to tell him what to do.

And it did seem to give Shin an edge on the battlefield. He would cut into the Legion's lines, disrupt the enemy's coordination, and distract them. At times, he'd even defeat Löwe all on his own. And this did mean his squad mates were exposed to less danger...

If nothing else...it did seem like he really didn't want to see his comrades die.

"Fine."

Shin raised his head in surprise, but Seiya continued speaking without looking him in the eye. Like he said, boosting the Juggernaut's mobility like that meant sacrificing the pilot's safety. It put a great deal of strain on both the rider and the rig.

This wasn't something to be thankful for.

"I'll tell you how to do it after I kick Karen's ass tomorrow. And I'll teach you how to service this thing, too. We've got some units to break in, so join me for that. And also...about your Personal Mark."

Shin blinked his bloodred eyes in surprise... That kind of expression was the only time he looked like a boy his age. Seiya sighed.

"It's about time you decide on one. Eijyu told you, didn't he? Think of something while you're in this unit... Well—"

The Juggernaut's coating was a light brown, like the color of dry bone. The Republic didn't supply the Eighty-Six with anything else, but they could find paint in other colors from abandoned stockpiles in nearby ruins.

"—we'll paint the coating in whatever color you want."

When they died, the Eighty-Six didn't get any gravestones or leave their names anywhere. This meant Personal Marks were incredibly pointless. At least, that's how Shin saw it, but people did want to decorate themselves that way. They probably knew this was a meaningless symbol since there would be no one to see or remember them, but they did so anyway.

The city ruins were covered by a layer of snow that had fallen the previous day. In one corner of it was a cathedral with a broken spire. In front of it, Shin found a battered Juggernaut. As he looked down at the Personal Mark emblazoned upon its crushed armor, a thought crossed his mind.

This wasn't one of his unit's Juggernauts. Its armor was tattered and ruined from being buried under the snow and exposed to the sun and rain. Within the cockpit's cheap Bakelite seat was a skeletal corpse covered in a discolored field uniform.

Its skull was nowhere to be seen. There was no silver dog tag dangling from its broken cervical vertebrae, which meant this was an Eighty-Six. Of course, Shin already knew this was an Eighty-Six's body. He also knew whose body it was.

“...”

The Juggernaut's half-faded Personal Mark was that of a headless skeleton shouldering a sword. Like a ghost wandering the battlefield even after death, in search of its missing head.

Some oddly cold part of Shin's mind noted that it almost felt like some kind of ironic prank being played on him.

Shin didn't know what he'd had in mind when he drew this Personal Mark on his unit. Maybe this really was his idea of an ironic sting directed at him, but Shin had to doubt if he'd even cared enough to do that.

But even so, at the very end, he'd called for him.

Shin.

Hearing that voice linger in his ears, Shin squinted. He soundlessly stepped down from the broken Juggernaut leg he was standing on. He knew there was nothing left here, but he felt like he should at least bury him... No. He wanted to

bury him. Even if he couldn't dig him a grave, he wanted to return him to the soil. And then...

He unconsciously reached out, touching the Personal Mark. He'd promised Alice and his first squadron's members that he'd carry all those who'd died with him. He would remember them all and carry them until he reached his final destination.

And while he wasn't one of them, he felt like he should take him, too.

The Juggernaut's armor was made of flimsy aluminum alloy. It was said that an aircraft's exterior, which was likewise made from flimsy aluminum, could be cut with a military knife. In which case, once he'd used the knife to remove some of it off, he could use his assault rifle's bayonet to cut it off, and—

"Pi."

"...Oh, it's you."

Apparently, it'd come looking for him. Upon seeing this old Scavenger—Fido—draw close, Shin put the knife away and stood up. They'd gotten split up during the previous day's battle, but apparently, it'd found him one way or another.

It approached him with noisy, cluttered steps as Shin looked across the snowy street, where his Juggernaut was sitting, and said:

"Sorry, my Juggernaut's out of energy. Resupply it. It's out of ammo, too."

"Pi."

The fighting had ended the previous day, but they were still in the contested zones. Being stuck in a situation where he couldn't fight was a situation he wanted to escape as soon as possible.

"And when you're done—" Shin was about to give more orders, but then he blinked in surprise as he realized something.

Scavengers were garbage-collecting units meant to gather the ruins of Legion and Juggernauts after battle. And they had burners and cutters for slicing metals so they could round up large pieces of wreckage.

Most Scavengers simply cut them into pieces and carried them back to

recycling reactors, but this oddly smart, old-model one might just be capable of...

“Fido. Can you cut this off? I just want to take this bit back with me,” Shin asked, poking his thumb in the direction of the Personal Mark.

He’d promised Alice he’d etch the dead’s names on shards of their units. But the truth was those were hard to come by after battles, so he usually made do with scraps of wood or metal he found.

But maybe, if Fido could cut off pieces of their armor for him...

“*Pi!*” Fido flashed its optical sensor.

“Go ahead, then.”

“*Pi.*”

There were no Legion nearby, and the animals wouldn’t take any interest in such a dried corpse. It was winter; the herbivores were feeble from lack of food and served as easy prey for carnivores. A skeleton that had lost all its flesh had no value to a hungry predator.

First, Shin had Fido resupply his unit. He stomped through the snow under the broken Juggernaut, followed by his faithful Scavenger. Fido cut off the optical mark easily enough, but burying the body took longer than he expected. Digging up the frozen soil with his bayonet was quite difficult.

In the end, Fido couldn’t stand to see him toil any longer (or so it seemed) and helped him out, and the two of them covered up the hole with a small, unimpressive mound. The snow had finished falling last night, and the sky was clear, but the wind was still chillingly cold.

Shin leaned against Fido’s container, which it had positioned so as to protect him from the wind. He sipped on some hot water he’d made from boiling some snow as he took a break, and then he got to his feet as the sun set early into the winter sky.

“*Pi.*”

After confirming that Shin had gotten enough rest, Fido got to its feet.

“Yeah, let’s get moving,” Shin said, gazing into its round optical sensor.

Even though it was only a handful of bleached bones, he didn't have the stamina or strength of will to get back in the swing of things after digging a grave, but...

"It'll be trouble if we don't get back before sundown... If we find any fragments of the captain's and the rest of the squad's rigs, we should bring them back, too."

0

Only Shin and a single Scavenger returned, carrying a bundle of aluminum fragments that were supposedly from Eijyu and the others' units.

"...I knew you were a god of pestilence," Seiya growled.

"Maybe I am," Shin said, not looking him in the eye.

None of the others survived, but Shin only had a few bruises and scratches. And that was despite him serving as the vanguard, the role with the highest mortality rate, in this mission, too. His devil's luck and absurd combat skills seemed cheeky now.

No one else returned, but he did. As if he'd stolen all their luck, sacrificed them so he could survive.

"He survived four years..." Seiya clenched his teeth. "So why now...?!"

But he bit his lip before he finished that sentence. That's right. It's *because* he'd survived for four years in this hell. The Eighty-Six were all fated to die. The Legion outnumbered and outmatched them, and this was a ward where the fighting was especially savage.

So even if it did happen soon after Shin came here...that wasn't why Eijyu had died. That wasn't why at all.

The sensible part of Seiya's mind knew this, but his emotions couldn't come to terms with that. It wasn't just Eijyu. Everyone else had died all at once in this battle. Even if the Eighty-Six all die sooner or later, squadrons don't get entirely wiped out that often.

And not to mention every single squadron Shin's ever been a part of. That makes no sense.

If you can't call him a god of pestilence, what is he?

A grim reaper, perhaps. A grim reaper who ruthlessly cuts down both friend and foe without distinction—

Shin parted his lips indifferently, not knowing the anger brewing in Seiya's heart or the jeering he was struggling to keep himself from saying aloud.

"Head Mechanic. Captain Nunat told me to decide on a Personal Name and Mark, remember?"

Seiya let out a long sigh, as if trying to vent out the pressure building up inside him. He's saying that now?

"Yeah... He did. Though, I think he wanted to think of one for you."

He likely expected Shin to be the first one under his command to survive a year. He perhaps saw him as something of a younger brother.

But Eijyu's gone now. He's gone and nowhere to be found.

"Yes... So I'll decide them for myself."

With that said, Shin handed Seiya a small aluminum plate. Seiya froze and blinked in surprise. It was a fragment of a Juggernaut's armor. It looked pretty old, and it had a faded, unfamiliar Personal Mark drawn on it. It didn't belong to any of the members of this base. But then whose unit was this? Where did Shin find this?

"I'm not good at drawing. Could you help me with this?"

So he was asking him to draw this?

Seiya found himself taking the plate and examining the Personal Mark. A headless skeletal knight shouldering a long sword. Name Bearers were seen as those who survived by stepping over the bodies of their dead comrades, and so their Personal Names were generally menacing, unpleasant titles. But this skeletal-knight design was especially ominous.

It was like...

“...It’s like a grim reaper. Or an undertaker. If it had a shovel, it would fit perfectly. A monstrous undertaker who survives alone to dig the graves of his peers.”

Yes. It almost felt like an ironic sting directed at Shin.

The comment made Shin crack a thin smile. A chilling grin that made the head of the maintenance team—a man ten years his elder—take a frightened step back.

“—Yeah. I don’t mind the sound of that.”

All his squad mates had died in the previous day’s operation. And in his last squadron, and the one before, and the one before that, no one survived but him. All of them, everyone who fought by his side, perished. Without exception. Every single one.

In which case, he didn’t mind this name. If he could just finally acknowledge himself for what he was, he could handle it better.

A god of pestilence. Or a grim reaper. If he could admit that, he’d be fine.

Being loathed as a monster haunted by ghosts would even be convenient. Let everyone else stare at him from a distance. It would make it so that when someone died, his heart wouldn’t waver from his self-levied goal of bringing everyone to his final destination. He had to survive, even if it meant fighting all alone. He had a wish he needed to see granted. So he might as well not rely on others to grant it for him.

And the one who’d made him realize that was—

He narrowed his crimson eyes and curled his lips into a cold smile. Seiya’s expression stiffened in terror. Or perhaps awe. Fido trembled next to them. Shin couldn’t see how gruesome, how ghastly the expression on his face was.

“I think I’ll make that my Personal Name. Yeah. It does suit me.”

The name signifying the grim reaper who was most familiar, most beloved, and most feared on this battlefield of certain death. He who stands closest to death but never dies and only buries others. He who places his dead comrades into graves that don’t exist. Who would bury all his future comrades. Who

would survive to the very end, until whatever awaits at the end of the road buries him in turn.

“Undertaker.”

Appendix

During a skirmish with the Legion the other day, Undertaker's armor had cracked around the cockpit block. That whole part of the armor needed to be replaced altogether. Right about where his Personal Mark was. And since Personal Marks were unique, redrawing them meant one would need to use a stencil.

And so...

"...There. Done."

Theo got to his feet and stretched, his slender limbs clad in coveralls spotted with paint. He then looked at Undertaker's newly replaced, pearl white armor and the freshly painted Personal Mark on it.

A skeleton shouldering a shovel.

Having drawn this symbol time and again over the years, Theo knew well enough that it wouldn't be long before this mark would be covered in scratches again. That left him a bit wistful. Much like the other Personal Marks he'd drawn, he was pretty proud of this one.

Watching him work from a distance—since Theo had shooed him away so he wouldn't distract him—Shin walked over and peered at the machine. He was clad in the Federacy's steel blue uniform. Having seen him in a camouflage uniform for years, Theo wasn't used to this appearance of his yet.

"Sorry for making you handle this for me every time."

"Mm, well, don't worry about it. I just have to draw the Marks for the four of you—and Lena's while I'm at it. B'sides, I like drawing."

He then added that it wasn't like anyone but him could draw in this group. This made Shin remember something.

"Right, you did ask me about it the first time we met. 'What's that drawing supposed to be?'"

Theo cracked a sardonic smile and mouthed an *oh*. Right, their first meeting in

the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Back then, everyone would still draw their own Personal Marks.

“Daiya’s was especially bad. He tried to draw a black dog, but it looked more like a black hippo.”

He only figured out it was supposed to be a black dog because Daiya told him his Personal Name.

“And Raiden’s werewolf just barely looked like a dog-human. Kurena forgot to draw the sights on her rifle, and Anju’s was actually pretty good, if a bit childish.”

Everyone’s was bad enough to just make Theo say, *Forget it, I’ll draw your Personal Marks from now on.*

If they were to die, their Juggernauts would be their coffins, making their Personal Marks their grave markers. Shin promised to carry on their hearts and memories, but their bodies would still be left behind and at least deserved that kind of tribute.

Half in reminiscence, Theo curled up his lips in a bittersweet smile.

“You never got much of a chance to draw, so you never got any better from when you were younger.”

Simply staying alive was the most they could do, and there weren’t any drawing supplies to distract the children with in the internment camps.

“But your Personal Mark was one I couldn’t really wrap my head around. It was like if it was good, that was cool, but it was pretty interesting even when it sucked.”

“You can just say it, you know. That it was so average it felt boring.”

“I mean, your drawings aren’t so much average as they’re just terribly practical. It’s not even exactly realistic. It’s like, they don’t really stir any emotion... Yeah, I guess *boring* just about sums it up.”

Since he was talking about it right in front of Shin, Theo felt his usual sharp-tongued, scathing comments might be inappropriate. So he tried—to no avail—to come up with a softer way of putting it. Thankfully, Shin didn’t mind. After all

this time, Theo's bad mouth and hostile attitude did little to faze him. Concluding that it wouldn't suit him to sugarcoat his words, Theo continued:

"You're not so much good at drawing as you're good at sketching. Like maps and schematics. It's like you've never drawn before, except for when you explained the terrain during briefings."

"Good observation."

"What, is that really all you draw for?"

No wonder it looked so practical. Thinking about it that way, Theo wasn't sure if the Republic hardly giving them any maps of their sectors was a good thing or a bad thing.

But now...now everything is different. The Federacy gives them everything they need to fight in battle like it's a matter of course. Support, education, entertainment. And the rights to both be buried when they die in battle and mourn those who perished.

"...You know, Shin," Theo said, feeling his crimson eyes settle on him.

Theo's own gaze was fixed on the newly drawn emblem of the headless skeleton. This eerie symbol of the reaper was their salvation in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, but...

"Shouldn't you change your Personal Mark? I mean, it might sound kinda weird, but you don't have to carry this burden anymore."

All the things he'd carried so far. The duty Theo and the others made him shoulder without even thinking twice. Theo felt rather mixed about it, but Shin didn't seem to notice. He simply looked at Theo dubiously, as if unsure where the sudden question came from.

"You don't like it?" He answered his question with a question.

"It's not that I don't like drawing it... I just think it might be bad luck, I guess?"

"Oh..." Shin hummed, paused for thought for a moment, and then shrugged. "Maybe it is. But I'd feel guilty calling it bad luck after I've used it for six years."

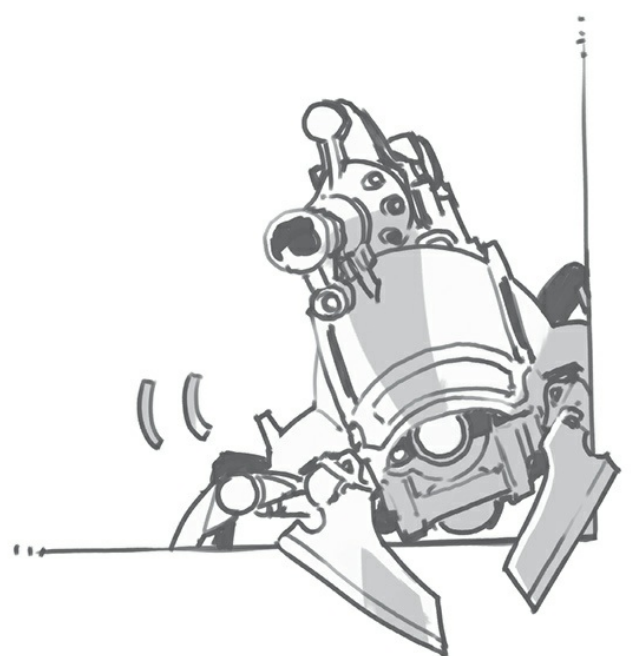
"...Right." Theo nodded with a sarcastic smile.

He still felt a little guilty and mixed about it, but if Shin was fine with it, so was he.

Shin then turned his eyes toward his Personal Mark and suddenly said, “Speaking of, about Lena’s Personal Mark...”

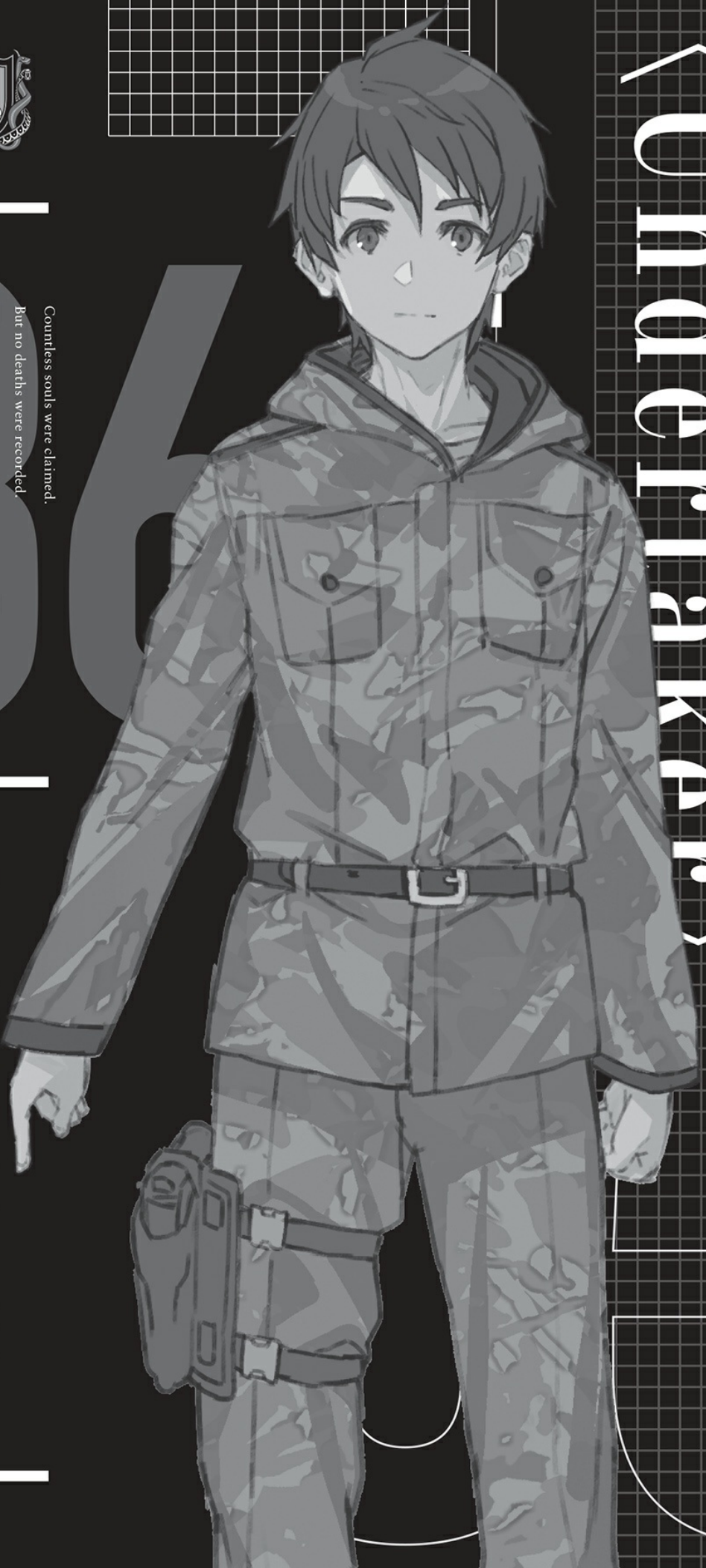
Theo snorted at him.

“Ah, yeah. I drew it, but I’m not accepting any constructive criticism.”



FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY >>>

<Underaker>



Countless souls were claimed.
But no deaths were recorded.

[EIGHTY-SIX]

These are the fragmental stories that turned the boy
into a Reaper...

CHAPTER 5

FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY: UNDERTAKER

4

The Legion began to retreat.

As cold, unfeeling killing machines, they exhibited no dread at the prospect of losing their comrades, nor did they feel driven to exact revenge. They either accomplished their objectives or retreated once their casualties exceeded a certain, predetermined threshold.

Perhaps in an attempt to conserve the Löwe, the receding mechanical wave let the self-propelled mines guard their back line. The enemy blips on the radar screen grew gradually less dense. Even so, the Processors tensely gazed into their radar screens, surveying their surroundings using the optical sensors, when a cold, clear, serene voice reached their ears.

The voice of the twenty-seventh ward's first defensive unit, Bayonet's—this squadron's—captain.

“Undertaker to all units. Combat concluded.”

His voice rang grimly. Like the voice of the combat machines that were their nemeses. Like the voice of a god ruling over this battlefield.

“Acknowledged, Alpha Leader.”

With that short reply, the Bayonet squadron's *vice captain*, Saiki Tateha, let the tension drain from his body. He could hear their comrades relax through the Resonance, too. Normally, the captain of the first platoon also served as the squad captain. But since this particular captain had a risky, melee-oriented combat style that made it difficult for him to assume command during savage battles, as well as some other circumstances, Saiki served as the first platoon's

captain.

These circumstances included both his relations with the rest of the squadron's members and the captain's preferred fighting style.

Looking ahead, he saw the captain's unit surrounded by the smoldering remains of the Legion. Saiki couldn't help but gasp in disbelief, as always. Most of the wreckage belonged to Löwe, too. While still graced with absurd mobility, they boasted the highest firepower and armor of all the Legion types, with the exception of the Dinosauria, which were rarely seen in the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield.

The Löwe weren't units a Juggernaut could hope to match. But several of them were sitting crushed and wrecked all around him.

True, Saiki and the others had offered him covering fire in the process, but he'd still defeated over half of them all on his own. The credit went entirely to their captain and his transcendent skill.

As the enemy blips disappeared from the battlefield, the Juggernauts' gazes all fixed on the captain's unit.

Standing in the midst of the wreckage of Löwe was a strange, unusual Juggernaut, capable of not only matching those menacing opponents, but also living to tell the tale. Its light-brown armor, the color of dried bone, was covered in scratches that told of its long service.

Since its limiters had been undone to increase its mobility, it generated enough heat to produce a heat haze even in the spring air. It was equipped with high-frequency blades for melee combat. And drawn over its cockpit was the small Personal Mark of a headless skeleton.

The unit with the name of Undertaker. In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, most Processors died within their first year, and those who lived longer than that were branded as Name Bearers with Personal Names. This Juggernaut was the unit of one such Name Bearer—one with a reaper's Personal Mark.

It moved like a dead soldier's skeleton, creeping along the battlefield in search of its lost head.

The captain seemed to let out a deep breath inside Undertaker. Saiki could

hear that singular exhalation in the now-silent Resonance.

“Return to base. Let the Scavengers handle recovering any wrecked Juggernauts.”

“Roger.”

With that reply, Saiki turned his Juggernaut around. This poorly made aluminum coffin moved with loud, rumbling footsteps. As his optical sensor swerved, the forest that was their battlefield came into view. Some trees were smashed and fallen, still covered in smoldering embers as they burned. Rocks had been shattered by bombardment, and the mud and undergrowth had been kicked up by multiple sets of mechanical legs trampling over them. And in between were the metallic and white wreckages of Legion and Juggernauts.

This was a standard sight in the Bayonet squadron’s and, indeed, the Eighty-Sixth Sector’s battlefields. But far in the distance, between the shade of the trees, the distant horizon was dyed red. This color alone was different. The strip bordering on the Legion’s territories was tinted a vivid crimson. There was probably a field of red flowers there. And since he could see it from this far off, it was likely quite vast.

Oh, it’s spring was the thought that occurred to Saiki.

It had been years since he’d paid any attention to the seasons. He was desperate to survive in the internment camps, so he didn’t notice the change in weather. And if he hadn’t come to this squadron, it wouldn’t have been long after he left the camp and came to the battlefield that he’d...

“...”

Come this time next year, most Processors likely wouldn’t be alive to see this crimson view again. But if they’re in this squadron, they might see it next year and the year after that. Maybe they’ll see different flowers.

Even if they themselves won’t be alive to see them.

“Alpha Leader? Is something wrong?”

“Ah, no. Sorry.” He hurriedly heeded the captain’s cold, somewhat dubious call.

Apparently, he’d been staring at the flower field long enough to arouse

suspicion. Their Handler from beyond the walls wasn't currently connected to the Resonance. The big important livestock keeper in charge of this platoon was a gutless coward. Despite it being his job, he refused to Resonate with the captain. He even cut the radio during battle.

Before battles, he would connect by way of radio to hand over command authorities to the captain and then spend the rest of the operation behind the walls, plugging his ears and shaking in terror.

Knowing this, the captain didn't bother reporting the operation's conclusion to the Handler. They would connect again when they were confident the battle was over and would leave him alone until then. Apparently, the captain sometimes ignored their calls since talking to them was irritating. And even then, the cowardly cattle keeper would refuse to connect to the Para-RAID.

Thanks to that, Saiki and the others could return to base, entrust their units with the maintenance crew, and get a chance to relax without having to listen to the white pig's shrill voice...and they wouldn't need to worry about their exchanges being overheard.

After all, the Eighty-Six were forbidden from referring to one another by their names during an operation.

"It's nothing, Undertaker... Shin."

Hearing Saiki call his name, the captain turned his unit to glance at him. Knowing the captain couldn't see it, Saiki smiled.

"Good work today, Reaper."

In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, most Processors die within their first year. And that means that most of the Processors fighting on the battlefield right now won't be here by this time next year. They won't be here to see the flowers blooming or the blue sky of the next spring. But this squadron might just see next year's red flowers, or perhaps even other flowers. Even if Saiki himself would be dead by then.

Because this squadron has a Reaper, who would carry the souls of the fallen along with him.

The Bayonet squadron's frontline base was made by reusing a small airport's hangar that had been abandoned when the Legion War broke out. It had likely housed aircraft in the past, because it was far taller and more spacious than the Juggernauts it now hosted needed.

The aircraft that were once here had likely been recovered with the civilians who were evacuated into the eighty-five Sectors. Or perhaps they'd simply been recycled in a factory to produce more Juggernauts. Whichever it was, they were nowhere to be found.

Either way, now that the Legion had stolen the skies away from humankind, aircraft were only good for transporting within one's borders and, at best, sightseeing flights within the walls. It's said that every so often some idiots do make sightseeing flights to the battlefield in pursuit of excitement. Saiki didn't care much for how those people ended up.

Stopping his Juggernaut at its designated spot, Saiki opened the canopy and exhaled. The cockpit was dark and cramped. It was closed up by armor, and three of its walls were covered in optical screens, which were the only way to see outside the unit.

It was almost suffocating. Saiki was still an adolescent. He was slender and hadn't grown to his full height. So if it felt cramped for him, it surely would have felt even worse for an adult Processor.

Indeed, compared with the size of the cockpit block, the head of the maintenance team, who was leaning over the machine, seemed too large to fit inside. He looked like a tall dwarf and had a large build.

"Shin... For the love of God, pilot your rig a little more carefully. Put yourself in my shoes for once. We fix and fix and fix, but you just keep breaking."

"Sorry," Shin said as he disembarked.

"Ugh... You always have to run wild, don't you?" The head of the maintenance team sighed, casting a sidelong glance at him and mumbling behind his mustache.

Shin landed on the hangar's floor, the tough soles of his military boots hitting the hard concrete without making any sound. It felt like the footsteps of the Legion. He scanned over the hangar with his crimson eyes.

Over the old building, faded from dust and exposure to sunlight. Over the lined-up Juggernauts. Over the Processors and maintenance crew walking through it. His indifferent gaze didn't settle on any of them.

Contrasting the intense ferocity of his combat skills, the captain looked almost deceptively young. Enough so to pass as one of the youngest Processors in the squadron. Saiki was turning fifteen this year, but the captain was two or three years younger.

Despite this, no one in the Bayonet squadron dared make light of him. Instead, they regarded him with reverence. Awe. And there really was something otherworldly to Shin. His expression was serene. His thoughts were always cold and precise. His fighting style was intense and experienced. Like a sharp blade that had been broken, reforged, and whetted over the course of countless battles.

It wasn't too long ago that his tenure in the Eighty-Sixth Sector had gone over one year, and he'd been serving as captain since the squadron before this one.

Everyone in that squadron had also died except for him, but that was because they had to launch an attack on a Legion advance position. A bridgehead the Legion set up in order to push deeper into the front lines.

Of course, it'd been surrounded by a considerably large force, set up to patrol and defend the point. They had to break through the Legion's counterattack and strike the enemy position, meaning that the Juggernauts were bound to take heavy losses. Depending on the size of the advance position, it could have become a do-or-die operation where not just one squadron, but the whole ward's four squadrons might have to be dispatched.

The fact that Shin could return alive from that was impressive enough.

And that was part of what made him so otherworldly. He walked through the hangar without interacting with anyone, his footsteps muffled. This made the Processors and maintenance crew stop chattering and fall silent. Like birds kneeling before a king eagle soaring composedly through the sky.

That was a Name Bearer. A monster who survived this battlefield of absolute death for over a year. He had *something* they lacked.

Shin didn't regard his comrades with a glance, either. Did he even realize they distanced themselves from him out of *respect*? To that end, Saiki and the other Processors could only look at him from afar. Both sides kept their distance, refusing and unable to cross that invisible line.

Saiki had to ask himself if that didn't make Shin feel alone. He wanted to reach out to him, speak up, but it always ended with silence. What could he even say?

Perhaps noticing that he was struggling for words, Shin turned his eyes to Saiki. For a moment, his emotionless gaze settled on Saiki's brown eyes, but then he looked away from him a moment later.

That intense yet serene shade of red.

No one had ever seen him take off his blue scarf, so no one knew what he was hiding under it. And because of that, someone once said something. By now, it was a joke everyone shared, hiding their fear, envy, and perhaps even a hint of pity behind it.

He lost his head long ago, and he's hiding the stitch marks behind that scarf.

The rider of a Feldreiß shaped like a skeleton seeking its lost head, always followed by a mechanical Scavenger that picked through the wreckage of his comrades. The single most despicable and beloved god of this battlefield, who would someday collect the Eighty-Six who died in the midst of combat.

They called him—the eastern front's Headless Reaper.

2

During that day's operation, two people died, and one of them was only injured, though not mortally enough to die.

That was, well...

"...Not something that happens every day."

Saiki looked at the two immobilized Juggernauts.

But then again, it wasn't all that unusual, either. One had their cockpit blown off by a Löwe's shells, and the other had his rig slashed by a Grauwolf's high-frequency blade.

He directed an accusatory gaze at Holly, a member of his platoon, but didn't say anything about her remark. There was nothing more to say. That's just what happens to the Eighty-Six. They're disposable weapon components. Cattle in human form. Even if they go extinct, the Republic wouldn't mind one bit.

So death wasn't a surprise anymore. They were used to it. And besides...

"We do have our Reaper, though," Holly said with a smile, her voice a mixture of sorrow and relief.

"...Yeah." Saiki nodded.

Right, they had their Reaper. He could accurately predict the Legion's movements during battle, and if someone died, he'd carry on their memories and take them along. When Shin first entered the Eighty-Sixth Sector, he made a pledge. That the one who survived until the very end would carry the fallen to their final destination.

And Shin survived. He was the one who could attain new heights they would never reach. So knowing he would take them there with him made death that much less scary. Even if they were unlucky enough to be injured but not die.

Shin approached the third stranded Juggernaut. Inside its burning aluminum armor was one unfortunate comrade of theirs, his body blackened and roasting but still alive. Shin's hand swiftly drew the pistol from his right leg's holster. He pulled the slide as he walked, loading the first bullet with practiced motions.

He then reached for the canopy's opening lever and muttered, as if speaking to himself, "...Plug your ears if you don't want to hear this."

Some of the younger Processors, roughly the same age as Shin, looked at the charred Juggernaut with their expressions pale and strained. They plugged their ears. Others turned away painfully. Confirming this with a sidelong glance, Shin opened the canopy.

He reached out for their comrade within the canopy, likely touching him and telling him a few words. Seeing this, Saiki lamented. He was so cold and always kept his distance from the others, but he wasn't emotionless. If anything, he really was—

But that thought was ruthlessly torn apart and scattered by the roar of three intermittent 9 mm shots.

When Saiki woke up the next morning, Shin was gone. His Juggernaut was missing from the hangar, as well.

Oh. Then he should be...

With that thought in mind, Saiki went to the spot where he would likely find him. And after walking for a while, he did indeed find him.

It was deep in a forest, in one corner of the Bayonet squadron's battlefield. A spring battlefield where one could spot a field of red flowers through the streets. And standing in front of the wreckage of the three Juggernauts that had been destroyed the previous day were Shin's Juggernaut and an old Scavenger he called Fido.

Fido was busy cutting off fragments of the three Juggernauts. The slashed, burned, and blasted bits. Cutting those bits of armor into plates, small enough to settle in the palm of one's hand.

These would fulfill the role of grave markers for the three who had died the previous day, since the Eighty-Six were forbidden from digging their graves.

Shin's expression was always a bit softer whenever Fido was around. But his expression grew a bit colder, and he turned his bloodred gaze in Saiki's direction.

"What are you doing in a place like this, Tateha?"

Hearing this question, Saiki stepped out from the shadow of the trees into the sunlight. He wasn't trying to hide per se, but he still raised his hands jokingly.

"You were gone, so I figured the Legion wouldn't show up today."

Shin wouldn't go out on his own if he'd have predicted a Legion attack. At least, he wouldn't be so quiet about it. This seasoned captain wouldn't just cast

aside his duties like that.

Shin gazed at Saiki, who was walking with his hands held up, but didn't smile.

"I'd be able to escape even if there was an attack, so I came this far... We're in the middle of the contested zones. This isn't the sort of place you can just take a stroll in."

You wouldn't be able to escape. His words contained that implicit, curt warning, but Saiki smiled nonetheless.

"I'll be fine so long as I'm with you, then."

Shin blinked once. Saiki knew, from their short acquaintance, that this was how Shin reacted when he was taken by surprise. Shin was still young enough to have the kind of gestures that Saiki...or rather, everyone else could easily detect. He was trying to hide his feelings, but he couldn't entirely bury them. He was trying to keep his heart silent, but he couldn't completely muffle its voice.

Shin wouldn't abandon him, and Saiki knew that. And that's why Saiki could do something as dangerous as walk into the contested zones alone.

He wouldn't abandon him. This guy wouldn't even abandon the dead, so he certainly wouldn't give up on the living. Such were Saiki's thoughts as he looked down at him.

Yes, looked down—even standing right in front of him, Shin still stood below his eye level. He was still a boy who hadn't quite grown to his full height. Saiki, who'd already hit puberty a few years ago, was larger than him in both height and build. And despite that, he had to rely on this younger boy for so much... None of them thought this was right.

"You say you're the one who'll take those who've died with you, but...I want to grieve them just as much as you do."

No one came to these places because they thought Shin, with his transcendent combat prowess, wouldn't need them, and they'd only hold him back. But the truth was, everyone wanted to...

That said, Fido was the one that handled removing the metallic fragments from the Juggernauts, and Shin simply accepted them. This meant Saiki had nothing to actually do there.

If the corpses were left, he could at least bury them (Saiki had brought a shovel in his Juggernaut to that end), but sadly, those had already been taken away by the Legion, along with most of the Juggernauts' wreckage.

The Legion employed the Tausendfüßler, a unit that prowled the battlefield for supplies and wreckage they could recycle. They were large, metallic centipedes capable of crushing an unarmed human, and they worked with enough efficiency and diligence to clean out this battlefield in the space of a single night.

He thought to at least gather some flowers for them, but this deep forest didn't have any presentable flowers for him to collect. So Saiki went about the nearby woods in search of flowers, only for his eyes to settle on something else.

Soft, fragile creatures fluttering their white wings under the gentle spring sunlight, dancing in the gentle breeze.

Butterflies.

"...And...here."

Cupping his palms, he swiftly caught one, before coming to. Turning around, he found Shin staring at him. There was a hint of exasperation to his expressionless eyes.

Hmm.

Caught in an awkward position, Saiki tried to feign calmness.

"You wanna catch one, too?" he asked with fake composure.

"No," Shin refused in an oddly childish manner, but then he realized how he sounded and averted his gaze. "You're strange."

"I wouldn't mind if we were in the middle of battle, but hearing a kid like you say it ticks me off a little. Don't go around calling people strange, would you?"

It almost felt like Shin was blind to how strange he himself was. With that said, Saiki opened his hand, releasing the butterfly. It fluttered upward, over the

treetops. Crossing through the verdant canopy of the trees, it vanished into the blue spring sky.

“Didn’t you want it?” Shin asked, watching it fly off.

“Mm, well, you know.”

The small, white butterfly had disappeared into the sky and was already out of view. But even so, Saiki narrowed his eyes, as if trying to trace its flight.

“It might be one of them.”

Maybe it was one of the comrades who’d died the previous day.

“...?”

Ever so slightly, Shin’s expressionless face contorted dubiously. Saiki shrugged.

“They say butterflies stand for the souls of the dead. They’re blue because that’s the color of heaven. Have you ever heard that?”

Even with no one to teach it, all cultures, all people seemed to regard butterflies as a symbol of the afterlife.

“No... Do you believe in that?”

In God? And the afterlife?

There was a hint of distaste to Shin’s voice, making it clear he didn’t buy any of that. Smiling at the irony of a reaper not believing in heaven or hell, Saiki shook his head.

“I don’t really believe in heaven. If heaven exists after all the stuff we’ve seen, I’d be kind of annoyed. But the butterflies...”

The idea of them being the souls of the dead...

“...I guess I do believe in that.”

He naturally turned his gaze to the sky. The azure, almost-moist spring sky. People considered blue to be the color of heaven because they thought that beyond that blue expanse, at the bottom of that blue ocean he couldn’t even fathom, was a world of the dead.

“How were the kids in your internment camps? The ones who were smaller than you. The ones who were babies or toddlers when you first got sent there.”

Shin fell silent for a moment, seemingly thinking back to something. His silence lingered, as if he was suppressing the emotion that memory spurred up.

“They died.”

“Figures. It was the same in my camp, too. They all died.”

The internment camps were a difficult environment to live in. The Eighty-Six were thrown there and subjected to stress from heartless jeering and violence. These children’s guardians—their parents, siblings, and the other adults who were with them—were all sent out to fight on the battlefield or died from the forced labor. And on top of that, there was no medical treatment to speak of. As a result, infant mortality was incredibly high.

Toddlers and babies always die easily. It’s only in the modern day and with the development of medicine that most infants survive and grow to adulthood. But the internment camps lacked the grace of such medical treatment, and so most babies passed away in their first winter.

“Back in my camp, they all caught some kind of disease and died. No one could treat them, and they were afraid that it might spread to the adults... So all the little ones were locked up in an abandoned barracks on the outskirts of the camp.”

“...”

“Those babies, they...”

He could remember it. A silent barracks, devoid of the sound of weeping and moaning. And on its farthest wall...

“They drew butterflies on the walls. Everywhere their hands could reach, they just scribbled butterflies.”

In muddy, sandy colors. The internment camps were nothing but cattle sheds located outside the walls, and so there were no crayons for the children to doodle with. But Saiki could somehow imagine, perhaps hallucinate, those missing colors. The vibrant, dazzling shades of many butterflies drawn by

countless infants. The color of their one, final dream.

“I mean, how would they know about butterflies? They were only infants, toddlers at best. No one could have taught them that. Yet they still drew butterflies.”

Perhaps unaware that butterflies symbolized souls...maybe they just saw a dream of themselves as butterflies, soaring away from this hell.

Seeing this convinced Saiki that butterflies must have been the souls of the deceased. When a person died, they became a butterfly. And so his long-dead conscripted parents, his elder brother and sister, and all their dead comrades...

“And us, too.”

He'd once heard of blue butterflies. They would live in the Republic's land, albeit not in the turf of the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Somewhere in this world were beautiful butterflies that shone with a dazzling blue glow. Creatures that were the incarnations of the dead, clad in the colors of the afterlife.

But Saiki will likely never see them. Not even when he dies.

“I was sure I'd only be a butterfly. That even when I die, I'd only ever become one of those. With feeble wings and a fragile body, toyed with by the wind and battered by the rain. A butterfly that would probably fall before it could get far from my body.”

He might never see the beautiful world those children dreamed of. And still...

“But now it's different. This place is different, because we have you.”

This place had a Reaper who would take those dead souls who could only become feeble butterflies, then bring them to where their wings couldn't carry them. Farther than Saiki and his comrades could go if they'd died on their own. Shin could take them to places they'd never otherwise see.

At the edge of the forest, deep in the eastern contested zones, red flowers bloomed along the border against the Legion's territories. And Shin could surely take them even beyond that crimson sight...

Shin returned his Juggernaut to its spot in the base's hangar, but he stayed inside his canopy, breathing out a small sigh. Through his active optical screen,

he could see Saiki disembark from his own Juggernaut and walk off with his usual light steps. He was shouldering an absurdly large shovel, which he'd stuffed into the cramped cockpit.

...Looking at him made Shin feel strange.

He'd kept away from people both so they wouldn't close that distance and so he wouldn't close it himself. But being with Saiki made him feel like he might be crossing that boundary without realizing it. Before he knew it, he wished to reach out to him, too.

But even if he did, everyone always left him behind.

"Handler One to First Platoon. Undertaker, do you read me?"

"Undertaker to Handler One. What's up?"

Shin replied to the voice of a young, somewhat timid man speaking to him through the wireless. Most of the Handlers inside the walls wouldn't Resonate with Shin through the Para-RAID. This one was especially cowardly and would only contact Shin by radio when he really had to.

As he waited for the Handler to speak up, Shin recalled that on paper, they were supposed to be in the middle of a patrol right now. Of course, they hadn't gone on patrols for some time now, since it wasn't necessary.

"I have the details for your next mission. We discovered a Legion advance position being built deep in the contested zones, adjacent to the Legion territories. The First Platoon is to mobilize all its forces and destroy the enemy."

Shin raised an eyebrow. To push their front lines ahead and expand their territory, the Legion would construct these advance positions to form a foothold. Once they'd finished building it, they'd of course launch an attack. A large enough attack to break through the Eighty-Six.

As such, beating them to the punch and attacking before the position is complete—before they're prepared to strike—is the correct course of action for the Republic and their defensive army, the Eighty-Six. However...

"Just the first platoon? Will we be receiving support from the second—or any other forces?"

The Legion were aware they could be attacked before their advance position

was complete. They had units to guard allies and intercept enemies deployed around the point the Handler had designated. There were roughly two battalions. And while there weren't any Löwe or Dinosauria there, there would definitely be Stier—anti-tank artillery types. A single squadron of Juggernauts would struggle to handle this alone.

“No... Command has decided that won't be necessary.”

Shin heaved a deep sigh. It sounded like the Handler was cowering on the other side of the line, but Shin didn't care. He had no reason to care. Facing two battalions of Legion with a squadron of less than twenty-four Juggernauts. This was, in other words—

“You're telling us to go to our deaths. Is that it, Handler One?”

0

Death was inevitable for the Eighty-Six.

They were all bound to perish on this battlefield of certain death sooner or later. They would be killed at the hands of mechanical ghosts. Abandoned by the Republic, which cast them out into a place where they'd be trapped between a minefield and the enemy.

It was a certainty.

But hearing that the Republic had essentially ordered them to march to their deaths, the Processors all fell silent. Having explained the details of their mission, Shin stood wordlessly in front of his squad mates. This base was only a hangar for autonomous drones, and they were in its small, poor excuse for a briefing room. In front of them was a map of the battlefield someone had torn off from somewhere.

Shin's silence was likely his way of saying that if they had any complaints or grudges to speak of, they could do it now. Even though he wasn't the one those feelings should be directed at. Knowing this, Saiki spoke up first. Before anyone could vent out their pent-up indignation or inexplicable terror at Shin.

After all, the Republic was so gripped by terror toward the Legion and

indignation toward inevitable defeat that they branded the Eighty-Six as pigs in human form. He couldn't let his comrades act the same as the white pigs.

"Understood. You don't have to look at him like that, you all. This isn't a problem. I mean—"

Saiki smiled composedly, feeling everyone's gazes gather on him, as if to say he was stating the obvious. There's nothing to fear. Because...

"—even if we die, you'll be there to take us with you, right, Reaper?"

The bloodred eyes watching him seemed to waver slightly. And seeing that tremor, Saiki spoke with a smile, trying to shoulder at least some of the burden. To make the weight he was bearing that much lighter.

"Then there's no problem. In fact, it's not bad at all... Didn't I tell you? Thanks to you, we don't have to die alone. Even if we die, we won't be forgotten... Even after we die, you'll bring us along. So dying isn't so bad."

Yes, death didn't scare him. He was prepared for it, because he knew that even after death, they'd still be saved. He only had one regret. This cold, severe boy. With that stone-faced, unmoving expression. He could never abandon any of his comrades, even when they were weak and unsightly enough to die and leave him behind.

This boy, who was truly kind at heart and always tried to save others...had no one who would save him. He never sought salvation from others.

In the end, they were nothing but a burden to him. Saiki wished that they could keep fighting by his side, but in the very end, they didn't have that kind of power.

...I'm sorry.

But Saiki couldn't put that feeling into words, and that emotion never reached Shin.

Sitting inside his Juggernaut's cockpit as it waited to sortie, Shin let his mind wander to the aluminum plates sitting in his storage compartment. He was already Resonated with the Para-RAID and could feel his comrades' strained nerves.

There were small Juggernaut fragments that had the names of dead comrades carved into them. An ever-growing pile of aluminum grave markers he'd etched in place of tombs he wasn't allowed to dig. He still vividly remembered the captain he'd made that oath with. Her smile and long black hair. And how he saw that black hair stained with her own red blood.

Some had loathed him. Some relied on him. There were those who shunned him and those who reached out to him. And he remembered every single one of them.

They all died. And more are bound to die. Here, in the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield—where the Eighty-Six live—no one can survive. Every single one of them was bound to die. And even so...

—You'll be there to take us with you, right, Reaper?

If doing that will be of any consolation to them. Because that's the only thing he can do. He would take everyone with him, until he reaches the conclusion of his own wish.

Shin looked up, his blood-colored eyes clear and cold. Like they were made of an intense calmness and gelid serenity.

Like a sword of ice, drawn from its scabbard.

Like a heartless reaper, ruling over a crimson battlefield.

It was the operation's starting time. His optical screen flickered to life, letters flying over it and illuminating the dim, sealed cockpit. Rough letters, matching the poor image quality of the screen. The activation screen of this walking aluminum coffin that was bound to someday become his casket.

<<System Start>>

<<RMI M1A4 Juggernaut OS Version 8.15>>

Looking ahead, he saw the battlefield in the distance was tinted red. Crimson red coquelicots, blooming across the battlefield as far as the eye could see. They burned red with the blood once shed on a skeletal battlefield.

And this Eighty-Sixth Sector, too, was a battlefield that produced skeletons. A battlefield where the Eighty-Six's corpses went unmourned, where clockwork

ghosts prowled. And a day would come when he, too, would join the ranks of the dead.

But until he does. Until he reaches the other side of that battlefield...

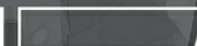
A rumbling cacophony mixed into the noise of the radio transmission.



These are the
fragmental
stories that
turned the boy
into a
Reaper...



FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY



<Culpa>

Countless souls were claimed.
But no deaths were recorded.

CHAPTER 6

FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY: CULPA

“What’s being done to you. What’s being taken from you, how you’re being hurt, and what to pass on to the next generations. That’s what you must learn.”

When his mother went to the battlefield, just like his father once did, Shin and his brother were taken in by the priest living in their internment camp’s church. When the priest said he would watch over their studies, this was the first thing he told them.

He’d forgotten what his parents looked like and soon forgot his elder brother’s face and voice. But he did remember those words. Shin was too young to understand them at the time, but based on how gravely his brother nodded in reply to them, he got the feeling the priest said something important he must remember.

This was something Shin only learned after the fact, but across the internment camps, there were still people like the priest, who would educate the children. First, the men had been taken out to do forced labor or fight on the battlefield. When the men died, the women were next, and then the sickly and the old. Only the truly elderly and the children were left in the camps, where there was no true community to speak of. And yet there were those who endeavored to grant the children a basic education.

It was both so they could learn new things when they wanted and so they could keep a record of the suffering they’d been put through. And so that if this internment were ever to end, these children would have the potential to build a future for themselves. Early on, some people still clung to that hope.

And so those of the elderly who still had their vitality and the older children who had a backbone gathered the younger children and gave them minimal education. They taught them how to read, write, and do basic arithmetic. The

Republic's inspections of the camps allowed it, since knowing how to read would be useful when the children were drafted.

Of course, there were many people who didn't participate in the education, and children who weren't interested in learning those skills, which weren't useful in the camps.

Shin hardly went to "school," and so the education the priest and his brother gave him was quite advanced and comprehensive. The Priest was once a Republic officer and received an education to match. He taught Shin what he knew, as well as the scriptures he studied and his own opinions and observations.

The church they were in belonged to a small village, but it had a long history to it, and its priests had amassed a large library of books. It was likely the largest library across all the internment camps, and even after leaving it, Shin thought he was lucky to have access to it.

But even so...

...on the night Shin was attacked by his brother...the priest never did tell him what sin he'd committed to incur such wrath.



"You're here again, Shin?"

"Reverend."

The priest stood tall, large enough to block the light filtering into the dark library. The leather-bound book Shin had was too large for his small hands, and so he sat with it open on his knees. That made his legs go a little numb.

With Rei having been drafted, Shin had more time alone. And so to fill the time he'd spent with his brother before, Shin had been trying to read through the church's library.

He didn't know what he'd done to anger his brother so much. He'd tried to mull it over but couldn't come up with anything. Realizing he lacked the vocabulary and knowledge to think about this, Shin decided he would study.

And while he studied, he could keep his mind from wondering about things

he'd rather not think about. Like the ghostly voices he'd been hearing since his brother killed him. Or the malice and hatred the other Eighty-Six outside the church directed at him for being a descendant of the Empire.

Or the absence of his brother, who'd left him behind despite always having been by his side ever since they entered this camp.

The priest looked into Shin's face, which had lost much of its expressiveness and emotion ever since the day Rei left three years ago, and forced himself to smile.

"Today's dinner should be quite the feast. I caught a bird that flew down from one of the trees outside. Quite the big one, too, so look forward to it... Right, I should teach you how to hunt animals without a rifle next time."

Aside from his education and knowledge, the priest had taught him how to hunt and handle a gun, as well as the basics of Feldreß combat. Over the last three years, the elderly had begun to die out, leaving only children in the camp. And since they were entering their teens, they were beginning to be drafted.

So the priest thought that if Shin couldn't avoid being conscripted, he could at least learn how to survive. Shin wanted to learn, too. If he died, he couldn't apologize to his brother. That same brother had told him to die, but he at least wanted to apologize first.

"...Yes."

"I'd love to invite the other kids outside over, but...it seems that they don't like me very much. So let's eat it, so as to not waste its life, shall we?" the priest said with a wry smile and a joking shrug.

"...I'm sorry," Shin said, averting his gaze from the priest. "It's because I'm staying here, right?"

In truth, the priest wanted to teach the skills he passed onto Shin to the rest of the children. They needed the knowledge to understand what they were being put through, the methods to oppose it, and the skills they'd need to survive on the battlefield. But he couldn't, and that was because Shin was with him.

He was a descendant of the Empire, which had started this war, and the

Eighty-Six saw him as an enemy who was responsible for their suffering. And so for no reason other than him having the bloodline of the Imperial nobles, Shin was being persecuted by his fellow Eighty-Six.

In truth, the only reason Shin was safe right now was because he was under the priest's protection. The priest was both an Alba and a former Republic soldier, and so he was feared by the people of the camp. On top of that, he had the tough, hulking physique of a grizzly bear, and so no Eighty-Six were brave enough to disturb the church that was his "territory." Especially not the children, who were only just entering their teens.

Even so, if he was to invite them into the church, there was no telling what they might do to Shin. And because of that, despite the doors of the church normally being open to everyone, the priest had to keep them shut. All to protect Shin, the last child left in his care.

"You've learned to apologize, have you?" the priest said, inclining his head. "Apologizing for so many things, none of which are your fault."

Shin had convinced himself they were all his fault.

"I already told you. They hate me as is. And I can't drag children who hate me to sit at my dinner table and read my books, can I? If they don't want my help, forcing it on them would be violence. Then I can't do anything for them. That's all there is to it."

"..."

"Moreover...what truly worries me is Rei. I've already told you, but you're not at fault for that. You didn't do anything wrong. Nothing of what happened back then was because of any sin you committed."

What happened there was Rei's sin.

Shin hung his head. It was because he said things like this, because he knew that question only hurt the priest, that Shin decided to not ask him what he did wrong anymore.

Reverend. That's not what I want to hear...



“Sorry, but I got a transmission from Command. Tell me about it some other time.”

With that said, Alice walked hurriedly out of the dining hall. Left all alone, Shin poked at his synthetic ration with his fork.

As captain, Alice showed neither favoritism nor discrimination toward any of her squad mates. Thanks to that, Shin wasn't being avoided by his squad mates for his noble Imperial blood. So whenever Alice wasn't around, Shin was all alone because he, in turn, avoided the others.

They may have been his squad mates, but older Processors scared him. And the maintenance crew, who were even older than them, frightened him, too.

Seeing people about the same age as his brother. Their hands, their voices, their gazes... They all conjured the memories. And it scared him.

“—Nouzen.”

The one who called out to him was the head of the maintenance team, Guren. Shin was especially bad with him and hearing him approach him so suddenly made Shin jolt a little. He felt a bit guilty about it, but Guren looked down on him from above, with the same red hair as his brother...

Guren seemed to sense his fear, though. He squatted down on the spot, which made Shin's nerves a little lighter. He peered into the boy's eyes with his own, sincere blue ones.

“Nouzen. Give it everything you've got out there so you don't die.”

That comment made Shin blink once. Alice had told him something similar earlier... Did he really look like he was hurrying to his death?

“Well... I don't want to die. I won't die, because I can't afford to.”

“That's the spirit. Use that will to survive. You better not leave Alice behind, you hear?”

“...?”

What did he mean by that?

“Alice is a Name Bearer. A veteran who's survived for years on this battlefield.

Which just means she's seen that many of her comrades die and leave her behind."

Shin widened his eyes in realization.

Over a hundred thousand Eighty-Six are drafted every year, but less than a thousand live to see their second year. Surviving for that long here meant seeing most of one's comrades die.

"From what I hear, you've got talent. The talent to fight through and survive. And that just means you shouldn't leave Alice all on her own."

With that said, Guren looked to the scarf wrapped around Shin's neck. His blue eyes contained a hint of pain. Like he was thinking back on someone who'd died and was already gone.

"I think losing you would hit her especially hard. So...try not to die out there."

At those words, Shin unconsciously grabbed his scarf. He thought back to the moment just slightly earlier, when Alice gave it to him.

She suddenly wrapped her hands around Shin's head softly, as if holding it in an embrace. With his field of vision blotted out and the unique gentle scent of a girl in his nostrils, Shin stiffened in place. Then she pulled back, and he blinked with surprise upon realizing she'd wrapped her sky-blue scarf around his neck.

His gaze seemed to ask why, to which Alice smiled.

"You don't want it to attract attention or for people to see it, right? You don't want them to blame whoever did this to you, and you don't want others to blame them, either."

She smiled, unaware of Shin's past or the feelings in his heart, but it was bold just the same—and somehow relieved.

"You want to protect that person, right?"

Her words made Shin look up in surprise. That was it. Those were the words some part of his heart always wanted. He wanted someone to acknowledge this.

He wanted to forgive him. His brother. He didn't want to begrudge and hate him. Rei had blamed him, nearly killed him, left a scar that would never go away

—but still...

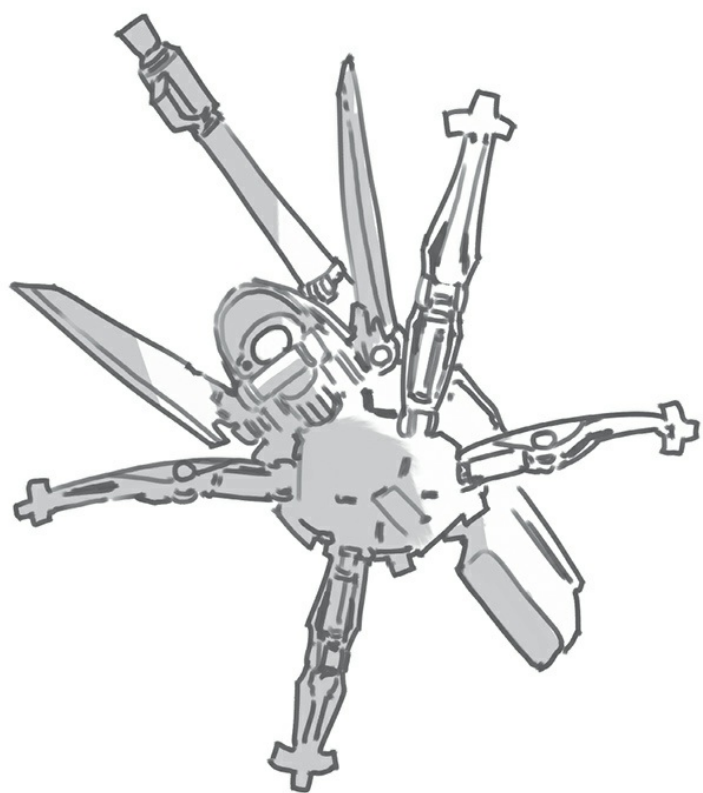
He still wanted to think of his brother as someone precious.

And it felt like Alice had given him the permission to do so.

Holding on to her scarf, which almost felt like it still had her lingering warmth in it, Shin thought. She'd certainly saved him in that one moment. What she gave him was a single sliver of salvation. And so he wanted to return that favor, to offer someone else that kind of salvation.

So don't...die out there.

"I won't... I promise."

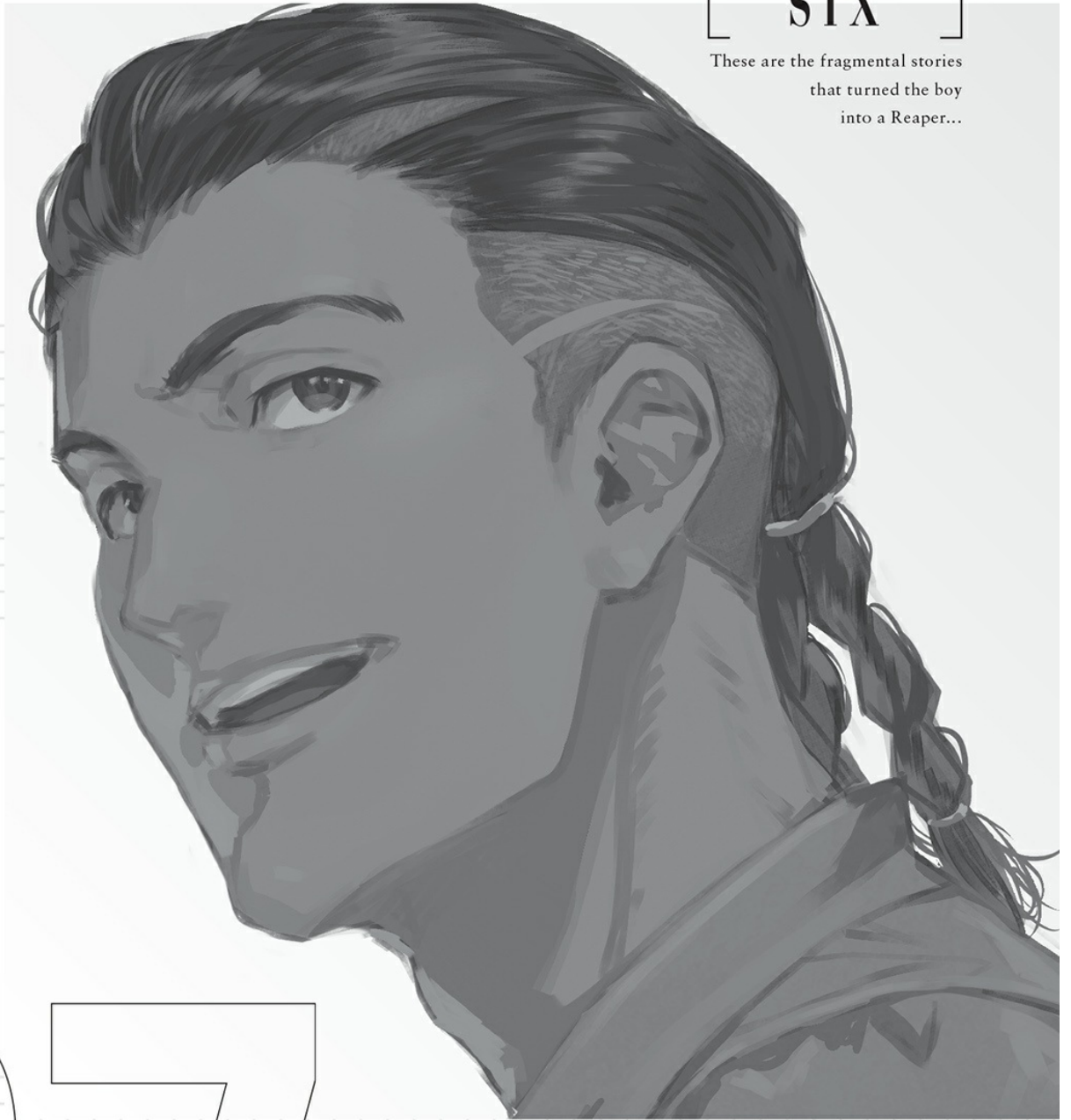




CHAPTER

EIGHTY-SIX

These are the fragmental stories
that turned the boy
into a Reaper...



Countless souls were claimed.
But no deaths were recorded.

FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY



The Simple Days of Triage Black Tag

Life, land, and legacy.
All reduced to a number.



CHAPTER 7

THE SIMPLE DAYS OF TRIAGE BLACK TAG

“—Fido, it’s fine. Tear it off.”

Tapping his hand on the crashed Juggernaut’s bent canopy, Shin spoke as he peered into a gaping hole in the unit’s warped armor. The squad mate sitting inside this unit was already beyond saving.

Having been ordered to remain on standby, Kujo realized her fate as he watched the scene through his Juggernaut’s optical screen. To begin with, when it came to Juggernauts, a Processor would never survive a full-force tackle to the flank from a Grauwolf. Of all defects possible, the Republic’s prided failure of a unit, the Juggernaut, had the cockpit loosely connected to the frame, which made the unit’s torso split in half horizontally when it was directly attacked.

Kujo had seen the terrible, gruesome sight of comrades with their upper half torn off along with their rig’s frame enough times to get used to it.

The old-model Scavenger called Fido used its burner and a crane arm to remove the canopy. Shin leaned over the exposed cockpit. Fido’s large frame hid the contents of the cockpit from view, preventing the other Processors from seeing the inside.

The Legion’s main force was already on the retreat, but some slow self-propelled mines—unsightly humanlike weapons, their bodies loaded with high explosives and directional shrapnel—could still be on the battlefield. Leaving their units after battle would be suicidal.

Shin, however, didn’t even seem to be cautious. He had a 9 mm automatic pistol in his one hand, and he didn’t have it out with the intention of killing himself, either.

He reached his hand to something crumbling inside, touching it. Upon getting

up, he didn't seem to lift his pistol.

Aaah, Kujo thought, closing his eyes. *No need to shoot her. She's already dead.*

She was lucky. The nervous and circulatory systems, which were essential for survival, were located in the head and chest. By contrast, wounds to the abdomen didn't lead to instant death. At worst, an injured person could spend long days in agony, unable to die. So in that regard, she was lucky.

She'd have died either way, so she was lucky enough to go painlessly.

Triage designation: black—someone who was still alive but would soon die. Those who were on the verge of death and didn't require medical attention. And the Eighty-Six who were cast out into the battlefield were all uniformly part of that category to begin with. They all shared that opinion with regards to death.

Still, she hadn't been given the privilege of dying while ignorant of the pain of her body being destroyed or her moment of death.

—Somebody, help me.

The memory of that feeble voice, not directed at anyone in particular, reaching his ears through the Sensory Resonance once again surfaced in Kujo's memories. He wished he could have protected her. The battlefield didn't even allow him to stay by her side and care for her. His precious comrade, who was like a little sister to him. Who'd fought by his side for years before they were even assigned to the Spearhead squadron.

I'm sorry, Mina. In the end, I couldn't do anything for you.

Kujo crossed himself, praying for her soul to rest in peace. This was a gesture no one else in the platoon made. The Eighty-Six were continually exposed to inescapable absurdity and suffering, and so they refused to believe in a God who wouldn't save them. Especially not in this squadron. They had a Reaper on their side, who granted Processors the only true peace of death and saved them from the worst possible conclusion.

He'd take Mina, and Matthew, who was the first member of this squadron to die...and when Kujo dies, him too... He'll take them to where they belong. Their

Reaper, not some imaginary God.

Looking through his optical screen, Kujo could see him. Standing alongside their comrades' remains, with the four-legged spider that was his mount. And by side, his loyal Scavenger attendant. He stood, true to his moniker, their ominous, beloved...beautiful Reaper.

But that said, spending one's days thinking of nothing but death would be absurd.

"A hundred thirty-two days till I end my service! Fuckin' glory to the Spearhead squadron!"

Standing at the back of the hangar like he did every morning, Kujo updated his colorful daily countdown. He walked off, clapping his hands to wipe the chalk from his palms. He had black skin, and hair and eyes of the Meridiana, a rare ethnicity even with the Eighty-Six, who were the ethnic minorities of the Republic. He stood tall, his body solidly built, his hair tied into three tight braids that reached down to his neck.

Enjoying life to the fullest and laughing off the hardships and bitter fates was the best way for a person to resist their persecution.

Entering the barracks' dining hall, Kujo found breakfast was being prepared. On the other side of the counter, Anju was stirring a large pot with a wooden ladle. Using a frying pan so large that it could be a blunt weapon, Raiden was making enough omelets for several people to eat.

Theo and Kurena were setting utensils on the counter, while Kaie was feeding the cat Daiya had picked up a while back. The other members and maintenance crew were seated at the table and chatting, while Shin sat farthest away, reading a book and keeping his distance from the group as he always did.

Kujo narrowed his eyes as a distant memory came to mind. Back when he was a boy...his mother would busily make breakfast in the kitchen at home, while his siblings would clamor around the table. His dad would be relaxing on the living room sofa, reading a newspaper...

Kujo didn't put it to words, though. If he was to call Shin the team's dad and Raiden the team's mom, he could probably expect a nauseating amount of

sugar to be spilled into his coffee. He knew this from experience—Kino actually did it once and ended up gagging on his drink.

Taking off the bandanna holding up her hair, Anju leaned over the counter.

“It’s ready; come get some. Oh, but go wash your hands, Kujo. They’re still covered in chalk.”

“Oh, whoops.”

Leaving behind the clattering sound of everyone rising from their seats (the chairs were wobbly, with some of their legs being a bit higher than the floor), Kujo left the dining hall to wash his hands. When he returned, he found someone had already left him his portion of the meal, to which he said a hearty “Thanks!” and took a seat.

Their meal that morning was some heated-up canned bread, rabbit-meat stew, and vegetable omelets. For dessert, they had berries, oranges, and coffee substitute made from dandelions. All those were procured from the abandoned city nearby, the adjacent forest, or raised behind their barracks.

Of course, they had no way of gathering much else, so it was a bit of a modest meal, but since they were used to the production plant’s horrible...or rather, tasteless synthesized foods, this kind of breakfast was a luxury.

But as Kujo approached the table, he blinked in surprise. There was a vacant seat at the breakfast table. Noticing his gaze, the others looked the same way. The realization spread throughout the dining hall, and everyone noticed at once.

It was Mina’s seat. But she’d died the previous day.

A heavy silence settled over the room. The Processors were used to seeing their comrades die every day, which made them quick to process death. In most cases, they’d spend that day or the night immediately after mourning whoever passed away, and by the next day, they were—at least outwardly—back to normal.

But this battlefield’s version of death was especially commonplace, obvious, and because of that, particularly vicious. Every now and then, something they didn’t expect would remind them of the sheer vastness of that loss.

Normally, they were able to forget and keep on smiling while ignoring this grim reminder of the gruesome future ahead of them.

The melancholic silence settled over the dining hall, which was otherwise dominated by the bright morning sunlight and the fragrant scents of their breakfast. Kujo clenched both his fists.

If you don't smile, you lose. If you don't have fun, you're just missing out.

Giving in to despair would mean surrendering to the white pigs who threw them into this battlefield. It would mean losing to them.

And like hell are we going to lose to them.

"Hey, guys! There's a full moon in three days. Let's have a moon viewing!"

Do you know about this, Kujo? They say there's a rabbit on the moon.

I wish I could see it. I wish I could go all the way to the moon.

Startled by his sudden call and all too absurd suggestion, everyone turned a surprised look in Kujo's direction. He carried on, undisturbed by their staring.

"Apparently, it's this festival they celebrate in the continent's east. Let's try it! It's probably a lot like the flower viewing we had earlier. Right, Kaie?!"

Kaie nodded hurriedly, slightly taken aback from having the question directed at her. Her raven-hued ponytail, the color unique to Orienta hair, waved back and forth as she did.

"Ah, yeah, I think so. I mean, I don't really know all that well, but probably!"

"Then let's drink some booze and have fun as we watch the moon! Not that we can drink, though!"

All Processors, Kujo included, didn't drink alcohol. Being drunk meant you couldn't fight, and not being able to fight would only get them killed in case of a Legion raid. Their dignity wouldn't allow them to die like that.

"Well, why not?" Raiden smirked, realizing the idea behind Kujo's suggestion. "We've got time to spare, and it'd make for a good change of pace."

The vice captain voiced his agreement. Kujo snuck a glance at the base's oldest resident, the head of the maintenance team, who simply gave a forced

smile. The rest of their squad mates and maintenance crew didn't seem to oppose the idea, either.

Which meant the only thing left was the squad captain's approval. Shin alone didn't seem to react to Mina's absence, his eyes still fixed on his book.

"So it's all right, yeah, Shin?!"

"..."

Shin's silence could mean consent, denial, or an admittance that he didn't listen for lack of interest. In most cases, it was the third option. So Kujo said it again.

"Let's have a moon viewing three days from now, when it's full! All right?!"

"I heard you. Yeah, why not?"

At this point, no one bothered asking him why he didn't say anything if he was listening. Snapping the book he was reading shut, Shin turned his eyes toward Kujo. The title on the cover was *Second Variety*, an old sci-fi novel.

Shin was both a bookworm and a desultory reader, so there was no consistency in what literature he selected. Earlier, he was reading an anthology of anti-war poems written by some female eastern poet. Before that, he was reading a drug-addled dictator's propaganda book. Raiden, who was his long-running comrade, always criticized Shin for his odd taste in books, and Kujo was inclined to agree.

But Kujo faintly realized why Shin had to act this way, and to that end, he couldn't resent this young man, who was three years his junior, for his arguably rude conduct.

So long as he was reading and had something to distract him...he could keep his mind away from *other things*. It lightened the strain on his mind.

"But isn't that an autumn custom? And we can't get our hands on any of the things they use during moon viewings."

"That doesn't really matter. I just want an excuse to have fun; it's not like any of us know how to do it."

Unusually enough, Shin made a slightly unpleasant expression.

“...So that’s why we were sipping cups of water during the flower viewing,” he muttered.

“Oh, right, you had this odd expression on your face back then,” Kaie said dubiously. “Was that really so bad? Pouring water instead of booze?”

They weren’t going to drink, but they at least wanted to get the right atmosphere. So they used a bottle of rare, high-class mineral water and eastern cups they found in a ruined department store.

“...Forget it.” Shin heaved a tired sigh.

Three days later, a storm broke out.

“God dammit...! Stupid moon! Stupid storm...!” Kujo whined, falling facedown on the table.

“C’mon, we can do it next month,” Theo said, sitting opposite him and resting his cheek on his palm. “Besides, don’t get that depressed over it. It was just an idea we came up with on the spot.”

It was hard to tell if Theo was trying to comfort him or twist the knife.

“Barkeep, get me a drink!” Kujo grumbled.

“Sure thing, want me to spill it over your head?”

Seeing Theo reach for a cup of water, Kujo decided to stop fooling around and got up. For how cute he looked, Theo could be pretty quick-tempered and vicious.

Folding his hands behind his head, Kujo leaned his body on the backrest.

“Ah, damn it all. Yeah, I came up with it on the spot, but I really was looking forward to it.”

That made Kujo remember.

Do you know about this, Kujo? They say there’s a rabbit on the moon.

I wish I could see it. I wish I could go all the way to the moon.

Or maybe we can see it from down here, too. The full moon can be pretty bright, so maybe just once?

Mina, when he first met her. With her innocent smile. She never did find the rabbit on the moon. So he'd hoped that he could search for it in her place.

"We all looked forward to it. But either way, today's just a no-go," Theo said, throwing his glance toward the hangar. Usually, this time after dinner, the maintenance crew were on their free time, but today, the hangar was still buzzing with the sound of their machinery.

The Juggernauts were fragile and got easily worn down by combat, not to mention there was a constant shortage of spare parts to repair them with. The Republic's supply of spare parts had come today, and the plane touched down late because the pilot was hungover. This of course meant that maintenance would have to be pushed back, and the crew could only get to work now, after a hurried dinner.

Daiya came back from a coffee break and took a seat next to Theo.

"They said they're gonna make it before lights out somehow," he stated.

Kujo exhaled a long breath out his nose. The maintenance crew had their own pride. They were the ones who serviced and kept the Processors' lifeline, their Juggernauts, in perfect shape. As such, they didn't let the Processors, who lacked the needed maintenance techniques, so much as touch their rigs as they worked. And yet...

"I wish we could find a way to help them...", Kujo said.

"Shin already asked them, but they said they don't need help and looking after brats like us would just distract them. But they also said they're sorry for how inconvenient this is."

Frontline bases that only had Eighty-Six—who didn't count as humans—were only supplied the minimal amount of electricity. And with the maintenance equipment taking up most of the electricity, the barracks hardly got any power to use whenever they worked.

This was why the rest of the Processors, including Daiya, were currently in the dining hall instead of being where they'd usually be at this time of the evening. There wasn't enough power to turn on the lights in their rooms.

Still, the sight and shrill voices of six girls—twice the usual number—in the

dining hall made Kujo smile broadly. Kujo had only attended school for a few years, but this was probably what a night at a school trip felt like. This unusual atmosphere made him feel elated, and everyone just hung back and did whatever they wanted.

Shin returned, assuming his usual seat at the back of the room, and opened a hardcover book. The kitten, which was seemingly scared of the first storm it'd ever experienced, hurriedly jumped over and clung to the chest of his field uniform.

"Whatcha reading?" Kujo asked him.

"The Mist," Shin replied briefly.

A closed-circle horror story written by a famous novelist. Not unlike how this base was currently isolated, what with the storm, the Legion, and the white pigs' minefields.

"...Aaah, yeah... But sadly, there's no mist this time—just a storm..."

A powerful, howling gust of wind washed over the base. It didn't just shake the windowpanes; it caused the whole barracks to creak. It made Kaie and Kurena jolt, and even Shin had to raise his eyes from the book.

The wind roared for a short while, shaking and rattling the barrack, eventually settling into an ominous, out-of-season wintery whistle. The hard sound of the heavy rain lashing down on the base almost sounded like a firefight.

"..."

At times like these, everyone would look up at the ceiling silently for some reason.

"...Come to think of it, this barracks' roof isn't leaky," Kurena said, recalling how terribly leaky the buildings in other frontline bases were.

"I mean, this is a frontline base on a critical defensive line," Raiden replied.

"Come on, Raiden, other bases protect important spots, too," Kujo said with an exaggerated, bitter expression. "Good luck finding a base without a leak, though. Last one I was in, the drainage overflowed, and all the base's personnel had to get every drop of water out with a bucket relay."

“Ah...”

Everyone (except Shin, who wasn't listening) contorted their faces unnaturally. They all had similar experiences in the past.

“But yeah, buckets are our friends! Right? And so are hammers, planks, and nails!”

“I don't like rain, but snow's even worse. What was it, two years ago? We got covered in heavy snow.”

“Oh yeah, and Shin ordered Fido to clear the snow as a joke, and it actually went and did it.”

“No, the worst thing is definitely the drafts... The base before this one was freezing, and it was winter, too. We all took turns getting colds and being sick in bed.”

“Oh yeah, bases like that are a real pain. And I was in one base where the hail punched holes through the hangar's ceiling...”

As the Processors told stories of bases they'd been in and the horrors of the weather there, the light bulb suddenly went out with an odd cracking sound. Everyone fell silent at once as darkness and quiet settled over the dining hall.

“Huh? A power outage?” Theo said, looking up at the light bulb.

“As if. The power cable's underground; the wind wouldn't sever it.”

“Hey, you think maybe the Republic got ruined?!”

“...Uh, Kurena, you sound so happy when you say that, but if that happens, we're doomed, too.”

Daiya replied to Kurena's remark, but he sounded pretty amused, too. They'd forced them into internment camps when they were little, and days of repeated, monotonous fighting left the Processors craving excitement. And so a storm and a power outage was a big enough event to fire them up, if only for how rare it was.

Everyone began speculating over the cause of the power outage, be it some supernatural phenomenon, a new type of Legion, or an alien attack. But a silent presence stood up, not making any footsteps, and a moment later, the light

suddenly flickered back on.

“Oh.”

“Ah.”

A few voices called out in disappointment or relief, and before long, Shin silently walked back into the dining hall.

“The breaker.”

“What, that’s all? Boring.”

But with that final word, the light went out again with a loud buzz.

“...”

Everyone looked up at the extinguished light bulb once more. This time, Shin didn’t move. Suddenly, an information terminal that had been thrown to the corner of the table lit up, and the sound of a neurotic young man spoke out of it, with the words *Audio only* flickering onto its monitor.

“Handler One to Spearhead squadron. Stop needlessly consuming all the electricity. We can’t perform maintenance on the medical unit.”

It was the voice of their commanding officer from the Republic’s eighty-five Sectors on the other side of the Gran Mur. For how exaggerated his title and how overbearing his attitude were, he was just a cattle keeper. A useless commander in name only.

Kujo frowned. *So this was why the breaker flipped.* The medical units were machines set up in each base in place of military physicians. It automatically diagnosed injuries and diseases and prescribed appropriate treatment. The white pigs would surely call this a cutting-edge medical system.

That said, the standards of its triage system quite frankly bordered on the insane. It only treated injuries that would allow a Processor to immediately return to the front lines. If treating an injury would leave a Processor unable to move for a time, even if it was a wound one could reasonably recover from given treatment, it would mark them with black tags and leave them to their fates.

The Republic’s values meant they wouldn’t feed a Processor who was useless

on the battlefield, and this machine was a blatant representation of that. Needless to say, the Processors all hated this cold, emotionless, and useless device.

Shin sighed and then opened his mouth to speak. The captain was usually the one to handle communications with the Handler.

“Handler One. Due to the delay in supplies this afternoon, service work on our Juggernauts is not yet complete. The medical unit’s maintenance is of low priority. Please postpone it.”

“Like I care. Hurry up. I can’t go home until the maintenance schedule is complete.”

Everyone let out soft sighs. Prioritizing the useless medical unit’s maintenance over the Juggernauts’ upkeep was absurd. And needless to say, they couldn’t care less about this Handler having to put up with overtime.

“I heard that, pigs. Treat your commanding officer with respect.”

Not that they’d pay any respect to an idiot who thought he could get pigs to be polite. Knowing all too well that he was being ignored, the Handler angrily spat out.

“You filthy stains... Bah, no matter. It’s the last time I’ll have to put up with you savage Eighty-Six.”

“Ah,” Shin let out this indifferent exclamation. “Right, you were quitting, weren’t you? I heard you joined the military since you had nowhere else to work. Did you find a new job?”

The Handler fell silent for a moment.

“...Who told you?”

You rambled about it when you were drunk, you moron.

Variants of that thought passed through all the Processors’ minds, but none of them said anything. The Handler’s tone became disgusted.

“Can’t let down my guard for one second around you, huh, Reaper...? You haunted freak.”

Kurena’s expression twisted up in anger, while Theo narrowed his eyes coldly. Shin didn’t seem to mind the comment, though. Eventually, it was the Handler

who broke the silence.

“...What, aren’t you filthy, lazy pigs curious about your next Handler?”

“Not really,” Shin replied flatly.

The Handler apparently failed to hear him, because he continued speaking smugly.

“She hasn’t heard about it herself yet, but apparently, it’s some rich chick. A former noble and an elite who skipped grades to graduate from her university early. Well, not that anyone expects a sheltered princess to command people properly. The most she’ll do is shepherd you pigs to some embarrassing death... A fitting end for you Eighty-Six. Serves you right.”

“...”

Watching Shin respond with silence, Kujo thought Shin could only hold his tongue because he honestly didn’t care. Processors didn’t usually trust their Handlers anyway. Whether the Handler was there or not didn’t matter... In fact, they were better off absent. There was less pointless shouting littering up the communication lines. So the Processors truly didn’t care.

Even the very thought that this was a sad, unfortunate fact had been cast by the wayside a long time ago.

Shin ignored the matter of the next Handler and brought the conversation back on track.

“If you’re quitting anyway, why don’t you forget the schedule and go home?”

His voice seemed to radiate an attitude that screamed, *Just go away already.*

“Don’t be stupid; breaking orders would just be a blow to my rating. I’m already in trouble because one of you got killed for no reason, so if my reputation gets any wo—”

Shin loudly clicked his tongue. This made the Handler jolt.

“A-anyway, this is an order. If work is still ongoing in the hangar, at least turn off the power to the barracks. Understood? Your job is to die in place of Republic citizens, not to fool around in the middle of the night.”

With that said, the Handler cut the connection, as if trying to flee. Everyone, Shin included, heaved a deep sigh.

They hated doing what that idiot said, but the Juggernauts were their lifelines, and they couldn't put off their maintenance work. And so they turned off the lights to the dining hall.

Instead, they put up chemical lanterns they found in an abandoned base, illuminating the room, which only seemed to make the atmosphere all the livelier. The Processors were bold that way.

And thus, paying no regard to the racket of the maintenance work, the cacophonous din of the heavy rain, and the shrill howling of the wind, they played around. They put together a tower of wooden fragments in the dark, told ghost stories, and took turns taking swigs out of a can of some preserved beverage.

Shin gave up on trying to read in the dark and instead hung out with Raiden, who'd brought out a chess set.

"...A female Handler, huh? That's rare."

Raiden suddenly said this as he held up his queen in his hand, spinning it between his fingers as he considered where to move it.

Despite advocating itself as a progressive country of equality, most of its military was—as armies tended to be—predominantly male. On top of that, it was also a sink for the unemployed who couldn't find work elsewhere. A young woman from a good house, and fresh out of her higher education at that, wouldn't normally go out of her way to work there.

"And a rich kid, too. Never heard of anyone like that in the army," said Daiya, and then he gagged on some liquid that was colored so strangely that, even in the dark, it was clear it wasn't meant for human consumption. He then passed the glass over to Haruto, who was slightly pale, and continued:

"Wonder what she's like. She must be, like, really pretty! Like a princess!"

His tone was clearly joking, and his friends caught on and replied with a nasty tone.

"Sure she is... A pretty, pretty pig princess."

"Must have big knockers, too. I mean, she is a fat pig, after all."

“Obviously. She’s a white pig.”

Theo, who was good at drawing, started scribbling her presumed likeness in his sketchbook. His friends huddled around him and immediately started cracking up. Theo then handed the sketchbook to Kujo, who laughed out loud. A white-pig-girl princess, clad in a frilly dress and with her hair in ringlets, winking suggestively at the viewer.

“Whoa, looks like the type to carry pink roses with her.”

“I mean, she’s probably one of those. The type to end her sentences with *kind sir* and refer to herself in the royal *we* or something. For sure.”

“Then she definitely greets people with *good day* and says *prithee* when she asks for things... I’d bet even Shin would snap at her in three days tops.”

“Then Theo would lose his temper at her day one.”

“What are you saying, Haruto? The first sentence she says would probably make him flip out.”

“Oh, you never know. Maybe she’s this sickly, secluded girl who’s never held anything heavier than a needle.”

“The kind that would die if exposed to strong rain or hard sunlight, right?”

“Uh, and she became a soldier?”

“Oh, so she’d talk with this timid, mumbling, unconfident voice, huh...? That’s even more annoying.”

“Peace, gentlemen. Keep your cool. She’s probably some ugly old maid no one wants to marry, and they’re forcing this job on her. That’s gotta be what’s going on.”

“Hell no, we’re talking about a goddess here. A goddess! Divinity incarnate sent down to this filthy world to save us pitiful Eighty-Six with her mercy... That’s the kind of Handler we need.”

As his friends continued their guessing game, thinking up theories as to what their next Handler would be like...Kujo narrowed his eyes.

“...Yeah, agreed.”

Even if she's no goddess. Even if she's not a benevolent princess.

"I hope she's a good person."

If they weren't allowed to at least dream of this much... If they couldn't have this small bit of salvation, how could they go on? How could they fight on this battlefield, where the people they wanted to protect most were already gone?

Kujo settled his attention on Shin, who cracked a sarcastic smile as he held the sketchbook with one hand. From a Processor's perspective, a good-natured Handler was an incompetent one. Actually, if they were just incompetent, that would be a blessing. The kind of "good-natured" people who tried to bring peacetime ethics into the battlefield only created more needless losses. They were worse than useless; they were actively harmful.

The consensus among Processors was that the best kind of Handlers were the idiots who neglected their job and dumped all the work on them. That thought made Kujo frown. It wasn't that he didn't agree, but it felt like sometimes you couldn't be this reductive about things—

Suddenly, the atmosphere about Shin chilled. He raised his head, like a hound that heard howling in the distance, and moved his gaze east—toward the Legion's territories.

Everyone knew what this meant and watched him with held breath. After a moment, his cold crimson eyes glinted like blades, which made Raiden narrow his own eyes bitterly.

"...Do we sortie?"

"Yeah. These aren't a number the second squadron can handle."

Fundamentally speaking, battles during the night were the responsibility of the first ward's second to fourth defensive units. However, in situations where they issued a request for aid, the first squadron, Spearhead, would have to sortie, as well.

Communications between different squadrons were strictly forbidden, so the Handler had to be the one to give the request. This made night raids, after the Handler went home, especially lethal.

Theo snapped his sketchbook shut and got to his feet. Those who had been under Shin's command in past squadrons were used to this and reacted quickly.

"I'll let the maintenance team know. How long do we have?"

"Three hours at best," Shin replied. "We'll sortie as soon as we're ready, even without a request."

"Understood."

Theo sprinted out into the darkness, like a cat with keen night vision. Without sparing a glance in his direction, Shin looked around the remaining members. They gazed back at him, all the smiles and chattering gone, their eyes glinting with tension and fighting spirit.

"Everyone, get some sleep while you still can. Depending on how things go, we might end up fighting through the night. Keep in mind we won't have time to rest once the operation begins."

"Roger."

But Shin's bloodred eyes held neither resolve nor fighting spirit. Only detached serenity. Seeing that made Kujo shiver.

Shin wasn't afraid. Not of the overwhelming battle with the Legion or the death awaiting everyone—and likely even himself. He simply remained cold and tranquil.

And that strangeness chilled Kujo to his core.

"We can't make a move until the Juggernauts are ready anyway. We'll probably take some losses, but focus on sweeping up the Legion... Don't be naive and think of saving anyone out there."

"All squadrons. I'm calling in place of your Handler, who is currently absent. Your sector's fourth squadron has issued a request for assistance. Please offer them support."

"Understood ... Thank you for your request."

Like Shin predicted, the squadron that had gone out to intercept the Legion had failed to stop the enemy's advance. The abandoned city ruins that made up the battlefield this time were, indeed, full of dead bodies and Juggernaut wreckage littering the concrete.

The Legion ranks were now being torn apart by the Spearhead squadron, which had launched a surprise attack and hit the enemy from their exposed flanks. All around the city ruins, individual Legion units were being engaged and taken out.

Looking at the Juggernaut with the Personal Mark of a headless skeleton, which led the charge, Kujo narrowed his eyes in momentary fascination.

Undertaker. Shin's unit.

Shin was strong.

Terrifyingly strong. The Legion's performance far exceeded the Juggernaut's in every way, yet with nothing but cultivated skill and intuition, Shin managed to overwhelm them with his unrivaled combat skills.

He took the most dangerous role of all, the vanguard, and Undertaker was optimized for melee combat. But not a single enemy bullet, not one slash ever landed on him as he cut down these nightmarish mechanical monstrosities. The sight of him sprinting through the dark, nighttime battlefield, his unit illuminated by the rain and flickering flames, was that of some terrible mythological monster.

Yes, Shin was strong.

And not just when it came to battle. Even just in terms of his mental prowess, Kujo thought Shin was strong. Shin never smiled, but he never gave in to hardship, either. He never dreamed, but he never yielded to despair, either.

Despite standing closest to death...he never acted as his comrades did. He didn't rely on bluffing and bravado. When the terror of death bore down on him, he didn't fake a smile like Kujo did. He always hung on to who he was.

Even if everyone else around him died, Shin would probably keep fighting on alone to the bitter end. And while Kujo didn't envy him in the slightest for it, he did think it was a terribly lonely way to live.

It wasn't a person's way of life, but that of an icy blade. A sword whetted and sharpened to cut absolutely, shattering only after it had completed its objective. With nothing to its name but the one thing it cut down.

It felt so terribly lonely. So if nothing else, Kujo wished Shin could find something, someone, anyone to occupy the hole in his heart. Anyone, really. If only there was someone like that...

But Kujo knew this was just a transient wish, too fragile to even be called a fantasy. They were locked away in a battlefield at the end of the world, and the only new people they could meet were their Handlers. And most of them were good-for-nothings anyway. No one on this battlefield could ever find salvation.

Oh, but that one earlier sounded like she was better than the rest.

Kujo recalled the girl who'd contacted them before the battle started. He curled his lips into a smile as he recalled her voice, which lingered in his ears like the chiming of a silver bell. She was some other squadron's Handler, who'd called in to request support for a squadron that wasn't even under her command.

Since they weren't on her Para-RAID settings, she used the base's radio. And since all the captains and vice captains were in their strategy meeting, Kujo picked up the call. Their conversation was a short, practical exchange of information, but he could hear the sincere kindness in her words. The clear, gentle timbre of her voice.

If only they had someone like her, maybe...

But then a screeching sound pulled Kujo out of his thoughts.

"What are you doing, Kujo?! You'll die if you don't keep moving!" His squad captain, Kaie, scolded him,

"S-sorry, Kaie!"

Kujo quickly turned his head, his optical sensor's footage skimming over the ground beneath his unit. Burning wreckage. Crushed Juggernaut legs and canopies. And next to them, the hulking frame of a Grauwolf that had seemingly been finished off along with this unit—

And then his audio sensor picked up a faint voice.

"Help me."

Kujo gasped and turned around. Between the lashing rain and the flickering

flames, he could see a silhouette clad in a field uniform extend its hand toward him.

A survivor! I have to help them out!

The memory of Mina's death flashed in his mind. He didn't see his close friend's last moments himself, but fortunately, she'd been lucky enough to get a quick death without needless suffering. But if he left this Processor to their fate, they would surely die. And unlike Mina, whom he couldn't help...he could save this one!

He reached for his canopy's opening lever. The Juggernaut didn't have a manipulator that could grab on to things, so if he wanted to pull this person out of the wreckage, he'd have to do it with his own hands.

Suddenly, for some reason, Shin's warning before this mission flashed in his mind.

Don't be naive and think of saving anyone out there.

Shaking his head, he pulled the lever. Compressed air escaped the cockpit, and the canopy popped up, along with the unit's gun barrel. The intense rain lashed down on his body.

"Hey, are you all right?!" Kujo asked.

And then...

The Handler girl who'd stayed behind in the common office to finish her work raised her head in surprise as the door slammed shut.

"Shit, why another one so soon...?! My rating's gonna take such a hit...!"

She watched her colleague in dumbfounded amazement as he walked off, muttering in irritation. This was technically a work place, a public space. Such an emotional outburst, to say nothing of his language, was inappropriate.

His slender face struck her as somewhat familiar. It was the same Handler who'd been absent earlier. She found his terminal, flickering with a request for support, and phoned it for him. Apparently, he was drinking despite being on the clock, and calling him back to the office was quite the endeavor.

The information detailing the names of Handlers who managed particular

squadrons or wards wasn't disclosed to the other Handlers, so she didn't know which squadron he commanded. But based on his reaction...the battle didn't end favorably.

And yet the first thing he had to say about that was lamenting his rating as a Handler. This was nothing new, of course, but the state of the Republic's citizens, the fact that they couldn't regard their fellow human beings like the people they were, made the girl's expression cloud over.

She thought back to that Processor she'd exchanged a few words with. A Processor of a defensive unit she wasn't familiar with, in a ward she didn't know of. He had the voice of a young man who was a bit older than her. His tone came across as slightly sad but otherwise amicable and friendly.

These were the kinds of people the Republic claimed weren't human? Ridiculous.

With that thought, the girl—the command and control officer for the ninth ward's third defensive unit, Vladilena Milizé—closed her eyes in prayer for that lost soul, who had surely perished on a distant battlefield in the name of a country that would never grieve them.

The Banks of the Lethe

These are the fragmental stories that turned
the boy into a Reaper...

FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY

[EIGHTY-SIX]

Countless souls were claimed.
But no deaths were recorded.

CHAPTER 8

THE BANKS OF THE LETHE

The coursing waters of the river were blue and spanned as far as the eye could see.

Specifically speaking, the opposite shore from the bank Raiden was standing on was several hundred meters away. Far enough to squander any curious desire he might have had to swim across. To begin with, it was already autumn, and the temperatures were dropping accordingly, so he certainly wasn't feeling inclined to go in for a dip.

That said, Raiden thought with a snort that if any of the other members of the Spearhead squadron—like Haruto, Daiya, or Kujo—were still around, they'd probably dive in headfirst.

It had been half a month since they'd departed on the Special Reconnaissance mission—a death march reserved for Eighty-Six who had been too stubborn to die.

By this point, he didn't know how far they'd traveled from the first ward's last base, mostly since they'd cut off their inertial navigation system's positional data. They finally got their journey to freedom. Letting everything end while knowing they'd only come so far from where they started would have been unpleasant.

"...The Juggernaut...can't cross this, right?" Raiden asked.

"Of course not," Shin, who stood next to him, replied curly.

Juggernauts couldn't traverse bodies of water. They were the product of hasty development and were only meant to hang on for a few years until the war ended on its own. It was a disposable suicide weapon. Its design and production were terribly careless, and even with the canopy closed, there were

multiple gaps in the machine.

Cockpits were usually airtight, so as to protect the pilot from nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare, but the Juggernaut's cockpit still had gaps. Needless to say, all its other parts weren't any more waterproof than the cockpit was.

So if they wanted to go over this river, they'd need to find or make a bridge. But since the dawn of history, bridges were deemed key military positions. Meaning the Legion likely regarded any bridges in the area as important routes.

When they'd reached the banks of this river three days ago, they sighted a Legion force crossing a nearby bridge and heading east. Of course, traversing the river was dangerous, since it divided the forces between the two banks of the river. Naturally, this meant they had reconnaissance units on high alert all around the area. The Spearhead squadron couldn't come anywhere near the bridge and had to lay low.

Making things worse, the day they arrived at the river, a storm settled over the area, and it rained for three days straight. Thankfully, they found shelter from the rain, which allowed them to start a fire in order to stave off the cold. That was a stroke of luck. They were already exhausted from the Special Reconnaissance mission, and if they didn't have that fire, some of them would have surely fallen ill.

They hid in an abandoned old pillbox on high ground to avoid the rising water and observed the Legion forces crossing the bridge from there. The days were dark with heavy black clouds blotting out the sun, and the pelting rain further obscured their field of vision. They watched the metallic horde march across the bridge, lining the entire bank as they went over the river and headed east.

It was a surreal sight. Like a bad dream, a nightmare one couldn't wake up from. It was a bigger army of Legion than they'd ever seen before, likely several divisions in size. The Legion could, without any particular effort, churn out these numbers and send them out to the battlefield.

Everyone—even Shin, who was rarely fazed by anything—could only watch the Legion march in silence. It felt like their future was thrust out before their eyes.

Humanity would lose this war.

The storm passed late the previous night, and that was about the same time that the last of the Legion passed the bridge. It only made sense it would take them that long. The lightest of the Legion, the Ameise, weighed over ten tonnes, while the Dinosauria weighed over one hundred tonnes. Tens of thousands of them had crossed the bridge.

When dawn rose on that day, the rain cleared as if it had never been there, and the Legion were all gone. They lingered on this bank, though, since Shin said they'd be better off waiting a while longer. They decided they would stay there an extra day and scout out the state of things.

...Raiden himself didn't like this. He felt that spending the first bright day they'd had in a while cooped up inside the Juggernaut's cockpit was a waste. Especially after they'd sat on their hands for three whole days because of the rain. But he didn't say anything. He didn't like it, but it wasn't like they were in a hurry to go anywhere.

Anju had been excitedly saying all morning that this was a fine day to do the laundry, and so she made an impromptu clothes-drying line between one of Fido's crane arms and her Juggernaut's barrel. There, she hung their worn-out, camouflage field uniforms and thin blankets to dry. It was an almost absurdly serene sight. It was hard to believe they were in Legion territory—just about the worst place a human could end up.

Raiden looked over the spanning scenery again. The cloudless azure sky was still barely dark and clear enough to let one observe the sea of stars in the heavens. The deep blue stretched as far as the eye could see. It was such an unrealistic scene. There weren't any enemies in sight, no people to be seen. It was simply peaceful and serene. It put Raiden in a strange mood. Like he was watching the world on its final, dying day.

"You know, looking at this view kind of feels like...we're the only ones left in the world," Raiden said.

Shin glanced in his direction. Raiden continued speaking without meeting his gaze. Mythologies across the continent regarded light blue as a color associated with heaven, and all cultures seemed to link rivers with passage into the

afterlife. He couldn't remember if it was the old woman or Shin who'd taught him that.

"Or maybe we're already all dead, and this is the entrance to heaven..."

Shin still stared at him with that sidelong look, seemingly amused.

"...What?" Raiden asked suspiciously.

"What was it you said before? *Perhaps dying wouldn't be so bad if this meteor shower is the last thing I get to see?*" Shin replied, a hint of an impish smile on his lips.

Raiden groaned. This was an old story from two years ago. Both of them survived a battle and ended up spending the night watching a once-in-a-century meteor shower when Raiden let that comment slip.

"That was surprisingly poetic of you," Shin added teasingly.

"...Shut up," Raiden growled through gritted teeth.

Shin laughed aloud. Raiden stared at him incredulously as he chortled without a care in the world. It had been half a month since he'd managed to slay his brother's ghost on their last battlefield on the Eighty-Sixth Sector. And ever since, Shin had started smiling and laughing more.

His expression seemed to soften a little. He cracked more jokes. Joined them more often in idle chatter. It was like something that had weighed on his heart had been lifted. Like he'd been released from a punishment imposed on him.

Maybe he'd felt liberated after putting the brother he'd sought on the battlefield over five long years to rest. Or maybe he was elated at their first true taste of freedom. And more than anything, that small bit of salvation he'd found was a major influence on him.

Their reaper, who would take all their dead comrades and even they themselves, who would die at the end of this journey. He would carry them, remembering every single one, until his final destination.

But when he would eventually meet his end, there wasn't anyone he could give his own heart to. Or so it should have been, but at the very, very end, he'd found someone he could entrust his feelings with. Someone he could ask to not

forget him, to entrust with that wish, to survive and come to the place where his end would meet him.

We're off, Major.

To Shin, being able to leave those words behind truly was a greater salvation than anything else.

After laughing for a short moment, Shin shrugged.

"I doubt we're already dead. If we were, we'd have just disappeared. We'd fade into the depths of darkness... We wouldn't be conscious or want for anything anymore."

Shin could hear the voices of lingering ghosts, and he could make out the moment they completely disappeared, too. It was a perception that was separate from his five senses, a perception that Raiden lacked. So whenever Shin described that ability, Raiden could never quite understand what he meant.

...The depths of darkness?

But anyway...

"Like the ones who died before we did...right?"

"Yeah."

The dead comrades Shin carried with him, who, along with his brother, now numbered at 576. They, who'd only known the battlefield of the Eighty-Sixth Sector, had likely never seen anything like this scenery.

Incidentally, since their laundry was currently being dried, and they naturally didn't have any spare sets, they were currently wearing some bedcovers they'd found in abandoned civilian homes. Needless to say, they looked quite shabby. And since they didn't want to move around too much in these makeshift clothes, they were sitting by the riverside, fishing with impromptu fishing rods they made out of string, branches, and chunks of metal.

The others were in a similar state of dress. Anju was humming some odd song to herself as she pretended to paint her nails with colored flower petals. Theo's creative urges were tickled by this sight, but since he had nothing to sketch on

or with, he simply twirled his fingers fretfully. Kurena was running and rolling around in a nearby field of flowers, which released cotton puffs into the air.

As Shin watched the fluffy balls of cotton soar up to the blue sky like snowfall on rewind, he said:

“Apparently, there’s a legend in the east about a white hare that rolls around in a field just like that.”

“...Ooh.” Raiden cared very little about that legend, but... “What did you just see that made you associate a *white* hare with it?”

“...”

On the other side of the field, Kurena was running around, a vivid quilt covering her pale, nude form. And as she ran, Raiden could make out the blanket flapping about quite conspicuously.

Despite it being autumn, the sunlight was hot, and the wind that came in the wake of last night’s storm was strong. The laundry they’d put up early would likely be dry by noon. They sat around a campfire, sipping on tea made of pine leaves as the fragrant scent of the slightly overcooked fish they’d had for lunch that day hung in the air. When they’d been in hiding, they had to put up with nasty synthesized rations, and so the fish was an appetizing change of pace.

A fox appeared—one that had doubtless never seen humans before—and peered at them curiously. They threw it a fish that was too small for them to eat, which it proceeded to sniff for a while before picking it up with its mouth and scampering away. Seeing it off with a smile, Anju said, “We did the laundry. Now if we just had a drum or something we could fill with water...”

Kurena gazed at her in blank puzzlement, while the three men, Raiden included, fell silent. They understood what she wanted to do, and they certainly understood why she wanted to do it, but...

“...So you basically want to heat up some water,” Raiden eventually said.

“Right! We’re so close to a river, but I’m tired of just dipping in the water. I wish we could take a bath!” Anju exclaimed, clapping her hands together.

“A bath?!” Kurena parroted her, her eyes positively sparkling.

“We’ve been wiping our body off, but that’s just not enough,” Anju continued. “And it was cold until yesterday, what with the rain, so I’d like to heat up a little.”

“A bath!” Kurena said again. “And a hot shower, and a towel, and soap!”

“All those are gonna be hard to find here, but I do miss them. I’d at least like to refresh myself a little.”

Faced with two girls chattering excitedly, the three boys exchanged glances.

That’s... Hmm, we get it, but... It’s not gonna happen...

“No, any drum we’d find will definitely be rusty... I mean, if it’s been sitting here for years...”

“And I’m pretty sure the Legion would have taken anything that still had fuel in it.”

“And besides, anything that has fuel in it is stuff that’s probably not safe for us to touch anymore. There won’t be any new, clean barrels lying around here.”

At this awkward but firm reminder of the reality they were in, Anju dropped her shoulders.

“...Yeah...I guess we won’t find a hot-water boiler around here...”

The frontline bases had shower rooms so the livestock—the Eighty-Six—could maintain basic hygiene. It took a long time for the water to heat up, and the facilities and fixtures were quite horrible, indeed only worthy of livestock.

But even those basic facilities weren’t something any one person could arrange on their own. They were based on multiple types of infrastructure provided by the state. And now that the group was cut off from that, they couldn’t even enjoy the privilege of a shower, even if it was a bad one.

It was a pretty grim reminder of how small and powerless humans could be...

Seeing Anju and Kurena hang their heads in disappointment, Fido, which had finally been freed from its duty of supporting the clothesline, blinked its optical sensor.

“Pi.”

“If you’re talking about the ammo container we emptied out ten days ago...,” Shin said. “It’s a bit badly welded, but we could cover that up with some cloth. More importantly, how are we going to heat up that much water? We don’t have the fuel to stoke that kind of fire.”

“*Pi...*,” Fido beeped dejectedly.

“...I gotta ask you again, how the hell can you tell what it’s saying, down to those kinds of details?” Theo asked, shuddering.

Raiden had to agree with Theo there.

“...*Pi!*”

“There’s a city nearby?” Shin asked pensively. “Well...I won’t stop you if you want to look for it.”

“Come on... How can you tell what it’s saying...?”

“Are you sure, Shin?” Anju asked, inclining her head to one side.

As much as she longed for a bath, she did realize it was realistically difficult to arrange. It would require a great deal of effort, and she assumed Shin, being the captain, wouldn’t approve of it. But Shin simply gave an indifferent shrug.

“I can understand wanting to take a hot shower, and it’s not like we’re in a hurry to get anywhere. Besides”—he smiled softly, flashing the serene expression he’d shown now and then during this journey—“we should be entering the old Empire’s territories soon. We might as well see what the Empire’s cities were like.”

They approached the city Fido had seen from the plateau, finding an Imperial flag with the symbol of the double-headed eagle flapping in the wind on the road leading into the city ruins. Next to it was a sign, too faded to read, with the name of the city.

The buildings were made of black and gray stone and blackened cast iron. Oppressive colors. Uniform, inorganic buildings lined the city, and by contrast, the roads were full of coordinated twists and turns, making the city feel labyrinthine.

It was quite unlike Republic cities, where the streets were a radial shape that

passed all the way from the city center to its outer brink, with a straight main street at the city's heart. There, where refined buildings were set up to reflect the architect's aesthetics. Imperial cities were planned, from the very beginning, to serve as military strongholds, and their design was meant to stall enemy armies marching through them and befuddle their sense of direction.

It drove the point home that they really had crossed the border between the Republic and the Empire, reaching what was once an enemy country.

They hid their Juggernauts in a warehouse on the city outskirts just in case. Raiden and the rest watched Fido go off in what was (probably) a jolly mood to search for a drum they could use, before exploring the Imperial city themselves, hoping to take in the sights of a foreign city.

Despite their expectations, once they stepped into the main street, they found stores standing side by side, their once-brilliant show windows lining the street. Just like a Republic city. In between stores they'd never seen before, they noticed fast-food chains whose names felt distantly familiar. They'd seen places like these in the ruins of the Eighty-Sixth Sector, but they'd never actually caught them in business.

As they watched Kurena walk between the two sides of the streets, peering into the clouded-over, broken show windows, Raiden was suddenly overcome by a strange feeling.

Figures dressed in desert camouflage, without regard for the season or terrain, wandering through abandoned city ruins. This was a sight he'd seen countless times in the Eighty-Sixth Sector when they foraged for supplies. But for a moment, the sight of Kurena walking along the flagstones of an unfamiliar country's city...almost gave him the feeling that he was looking at an ordinary girl walking through a peaceful city.

Had it not been for the Legion War, had the Republic not persecuted the Eighty-Six, she...all of them would have been just ordinary children, living uneventful lives. Had things not turned out this way, they might have never met at all.

Kurena was born in one of the northern secondary capital's, Charité's, satellite cities. Theo was born on the other side of the Republic, near the old

southern border. Anju was born in a small eastern city. Raiden was from what was currently the thirty-second administrative Sector.

None of them would have had a chance to meet. The rest of Spearhead's members had also come from all over the Republic.

Shin was apparently born in the Republic's capital of Liberté et Égalité. The capital, along with what currently served as the first to fifth administrative Sectors, had been a high-end, affluent residential area since before the war. Children born there hardly ever left those areas, save for vacations or school trips, and people rarely moved in, either.

Were it not for the war... Were it not for the white pigs casting them out onto the battlefield together...they likely would have spent their entire lives without ever crossing paths. And that thought made walking through the same places and looking at the same things feel very strange.

He then noticed Shin stop in his tracks. He was in a square that was oddly decorated compared with the rest of this oppressive, impersonal city. Statues lined the square. At first, Raiden thought he was looking at a statue of a young woman, perhaps an empress, clad in a needlessly gaudy uniform and an overly long mantle. But upon closer inspection, Shin's gaze wasn't fixed on the statue, but rather on the autumn sky that was its backdrop. To the east.

"What's wrong?" Raiden asked.

Shin turned his bloodred eyes to him and blinked. He didn't even notice Raiden had approached him.

"No..." He fell silent, pausing for thought for a moment...or perhaps lending an ear to some voice in the distance, before eventually shaking his head. "It's nothing... We're probably fine."

"...?"

That meant there was cause for concern. Were the Legion nearby? Thinking back on it, Raiden did see him look around curiously a few times during their journey.

"They didn't notice us, and I don't think there's much of a chance of us running into them," Shin continued. "Nothing should happen, assuming we

don't approach them ourselves, that is."

"Oh, so it really was the Legion."

It was easy to forget, especially on days like this one, but they were within Legion territory. A place where humans couldn't live. They were walking through a place like this with just five Juggernauts. If they made even one wrong move, they could all get wiped out in the blink of an eye.

Raiden turned his eyes to Shin again. They were all exhausted by the Special Reconnaissance mission. And Shin had it especially bad.

"You tired, man? If you want to take a breather, that pillbox should be hard to spot. If we go back there, you can take your time and rest for a while longer."

They were in a land teeming with Legion, and no one could do Shin's reconnaissance duties for him. There were countless more ghosts prowling the battlefield compared with the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and he had no way of blocking off their voices. It wouldn't be strange at all if he was much more exhausted than the rest of them were. Maybe this was why he said they'd take a wait-and-see approach today.

For a moment, Shin stared at him, dumbfounded, but upon understanding what Raiden meant, he snickered.

"...The hell?" Raiden asked.

"Sorry," Shin said, still smiling. "But I already told you. I'm used to hearing the Legion's voices. Coming to the territories doesn't matter that much to me."

"You say that, but you..."

Raiden had known him for nearly four years, and he knew that, perhaps as backlash for his ability to hear the Legion, he would sometimes go out like a light. Raiden knew better than to assume Shin was fine and used to this just because he said so. If nothing else, this was definitely weighing on him.

"Given that we're not going to get any supplies, we're limited in how many days we can keep going. So rather than taking a needless break, we should be focusing on getting farther ahead."

How many days they can keep going. In other words, how many days they can

survive. The first ward's frontline base had only given them supplies for one month, and those reserves were gradually being whittled down.

Raiden heaved a deep sigh. *Well...if he says so, so be it.*

"Roger... That said, we finally made it to the Empire."

"I didn't think we'd get this far. I honestly didn't expect we'd survive this long."

"...Does this place bring back memories?" Raiden asked, glancing at Shin.

Shin's parents emigrated to the Republic from the Giadian Empire, making him a second-generation Republic citizen of Giadian descent. His family hadn't been Republic citizens for long. Raiden thought he might be familiar with the Empire's culture due to his parents' influence. If his grandparents or other relatives had remained in the Empire, perhaps he'd even visited the country once before.

Shin, however, simply shook his head.

"No, I've never been to the Empire. I can hardly remember my parents anyway... It just feels like a foreign country to me."

He then breathed out and moved his gaze back to Raiden.

"What about you? Weren't your family immigrants from the Empire?"

"Nah, that was my grandpa's grandpa...or even their grandpa..."

It must have been two hundred years ago that Raiden's family moved to the Republic. Even calling them his ancestors felt like too close of a description. *An entire village moved away from the Empire to the Republic*, Raiden thought as he looked at how the thick azure blanket of the sky melted into the horizon. Shin glanced in the same direction, likely feeling the same thing he did.

They'd reached their so-called homeland, the place their bloodlines derived from. Had things been just a little different, this could have been their native land. But though they'd finally set foot here...

"In the end, this place...isn't where we belong."

"...I guess not."

Somewhere in the distance, they heard the high-pitched calling of a pheasant.

Fido really outdid itself.

“...A solar water heater. I see. I’ll admit I didn’t think of that.”

“And its water pumping system and solar power generator are still operable...”

“This thing can probably heat up a container’s worth of water no problem, but...isn’t Fido a little too smart?”

They drew water from the river, putting them in high-capacity tanks that warmed up the water using solar panels. As Anju and Kurena exchanged an enthusiastic high five, Fido looked ever so slightly boastful.

Sitting in its roost between the bushes, the small animal was gnawing on the bones of the fish the strange creatures had thrown it earlier that day. But then it suddenly heard a peculiar howl echo from afar across the afterglow and pricked up its ears in concern.

“Whoaaaaaaaaaaaaa, so waaaaarm...!”

It was a curious sound, unlike the howling of a wolf. Maybe it was those strange creatures from earlier. It certainly had a weird tone that would fit those strange creatures. It didn’t hear that voice again after that. And so with a wag of its fluffy tail, the fox returned to its task of gnawing on the bones.

“Whoaaaaaaaaaaaaa, so waaaaarm...!”

“Kurena, the Legion might hear you if you shout that loud.”

But Kurena was so excited by the prospect of a bath after such a long time that Anju’s warning didn’t quite get through to her. She looked happy to the point that if she had a tail, it would surely be wagging vigorously as she splashed into the container full of hot water. This container was large enough to contain multiple 57 mm cartridges, and they hid it inside a building that had its ceiling missing, giving them a view of the reddening sky.

Visibly satisfied, Kurena soaked herself up to her shoulders in the water, which was heated up by solar power.

“It really feels so good... It’ll probably get colder as time goes by. I wish Shin

and the others could go in with us, too...”

As one might expect, the three boys weren't there. They let the girls get the first dip and were waiting outside the building, loading a small supply of canned foods onto Fido's container. Seeing Anju sigh and regard her reproachfully with one eye closed, Kurena jolted.

“Wh-what did I say?!”

“You say some pretty daring things without even thinking about it, but you can't bring yourself to actually act on them. *That's* your problem, if you ask me.”

Realizing what she'd just said, Kurena went red up to her ears.

“N-no! That's not what I meant—”

“Also, I feel strange even having to mention it, but you do realize that only little girls would say that, right? Begging your big brother to take a bath with you and the like. I'm pretty sure said big brother would start losing his patience with you.”

“But that's not what I— Wait, really?!”

Despite sitting in hot water up to her shoulders, Kurena grew very pale this time, prompting another sigh from Anju.

“...And to top it off, saying it out loud when we're within earshot is one of Kurena's bad habits...”

Sinking into the water, which had gotten a bit colder with the passage of time, and resting his arms on the edge of the container, Theo looked up at the violet sky as the darkness of night crept in and the stars became visible.

Shin himself feigned ignorance and pretended not to have heard her, while Raiden remained silent, looking away as he couldn't find any words to address this with. Shin probably had the worst of it, though. Theo didn't expect an answer and didn't say anything else.

When they'd heard Kurena's comment, they all choked on their pine-leaf tea. Bathing with them wasn't an idea they could agree with, of course.

“Shin... Why do you think Kurena's such a little kid on the inside...?”

“...Don’t ask me.”

...Fair enough.

They returned to their camp at the pillbox and immediately helped themselves to the canned soup and hard biscuits they found. The boys then wrapped themselves in warm, newly washed blankets that smelled of sunlight and soon fell asleep.

Their unsupported march through enemy territory depleted their supplies every day. This lack of equipment tightened slowly but surely around their necks like a fine silk noose. They camped out for days in the chilly temperatures of autumn, eating synthetic rations that weren’t worthy of being called food and certainly weren’t meant to keep Eighty-Six alive.

This journey only exhausted them and gave them little chances to rest. Their fatigue was definitely accumulating; they just weren’t aware of it. And they all realized, deep down, that if this were to go on, they wouldn’t last long.

The chilling rain had passed the previous day, and the Legion weren’t nearby. The pillbox they were in wouldn’t allow the mountain wind or any animals to disturb them.

And so having found a safe resting place for the first time in a while, the boys fell into a deep sleep. The quiet hooting of the owls would not disturb their slumber. Only Fido sat squatted by the pillbox’s small window, bathed in moonlight as it listened to their silent breathing.



—*Mm.*

Hearing a voice tug at his consciousness, Shin awakened from his shallow slumber that morning.

One of the voices had moved closer compared with the previous day. It was only one unit, meaning it probably wasn’t on patrol. Legion patrol units moved in platoons or companies. And the odd direction it was moving in implied it wasn’t looking for them, either...

No, this voice was...

It's...calling?

But it wasn't calling Shin. It wasn't calling anyone in particular.

Someone. Anyone.

Please... Somebody...

...end me...

Narrowing his eyes, Shin tore the thin blanket from his body.

The other unit seemed to have stopped for today. And so Shin got to his feet silently.

When they woke up, Shin was gone.

“...What's that idiot doing?”

Fido was still there, and so was Undertaker. Which meant he didn't just run off on them. They tried connecting to him through the Para-RAID, but he closed the Resonance as soon as they connected, which didn't make it seem like he was in trouble. But he did take the assault rifle he kept in Undertaker's cockpit and his usual pistol with him.

Really, what the hell is he doing?

They waited for a while, but he didn't come back. Kurena started fidgeting in concern, and so Raiden decided it was time for them to go looking for him.

They descended the high ground and thankfully found a muddy road that still had a fresh pair of footprints leading to the city ruins. The muddy footprints soon dried out and disappeared, so they could only see the general direction he'd walked in. They traveled along the outer edge of the city, eventually finding...

“...A zoo?”

The word was written on a large sign in gaudy, gilded letters. The sign was atop a gate that was designed like rose vines and surrounded by white stone walls and a silver fence. It wasn't a large zoo, though. Perhaps the city's governor had made it as part of a hobby and opened it to the public. Indeed, the cages and the flagstones of the pavement seemed to be arranged chicly.

This was a provincial city near the border and a military fortress, so the nobles of the Empire must have had a lot of time and spare money on their hands to build this.

But those were about the only things that'd been left of the past.

This city had likely been evacuated and abandoned to escape the Legion. Based on how many of the supplies here were left untouched, it was easy to imagine that the evacuation was done in quite the hurry. And of course, the people were so keen on getting away alive that they didn't have any time to free the animals from their cages.

Lying behind a cage with its bars designed like coiling grapevines was the bleached skeleton of some large animal. The dusted plate next to it said it was a tiger, but there were no longer any traces of its imposing physique or brilliant striped fur left.

A lion. A polar bear. An alligator. A peacock. A black eagle... All of them reduced to skeletons. One of a hyena sat in its cage, its jaws clenched on the bars in an attempt to bite its way out. Perhaps it died of thirst before the Legion arrived to kill it.

These cages were meant to keep the rare animals from escaping, but they also kept the carnivores, like wolves and foxes, from eating the corpses. This instead allowed the smaller creatures to simply decompose. Thinking of these animals, which had been taken from their faraway homes and locked up in cages, only to rot on the concrete without ever becoming nourishment for anything... It gave the four of them a terribly hollow feeling.

They, too, had been taken away from their homeland and locked up. For them, they were caged in the battlefield, where they were forced to die pointless deaths in battle. Their lives would leave nothing behind. Their lives wouldn't be allowed to hold any value.

These animals are just like us Eighty-Six...

Perhaps being named after a dog gave it an odd sense of kinship, because Fido stopped stock-still near the bones of what was supposedly a strange canine of eastern origin. It likely felt something similar to what the Eighty-Six felt, despite being used to seeing skeletons thanks to its work collecting the corpses

of the war dead.

The corpses of animals, left to perish without anywhere to go or any purpose to their lives.

“Is this how we’re going to...?” Kurena whispered softly.

She then pursed her rough lips, trailing off like she was afraid to finish that sentence. But they all felt like they knew what she was going to say.

Is this how we’re going to die? Or...

Unknown to anyone, unable to touch on anyone’s lives, simply gone and forgotten...?

Four people and one machine marched through this abandoned zoo, lined with decorated cages that incarcerated the lifeless remains of those animals. They passed silently through this display of boundless death.

And at the farthest edge of the zoo, they found one silver cage that was larger and more decorated than the rest. Inside it was the large skull of an elephant, gazing at them through its empty eye sockets. There, Shin stood, his back turned to them. And right in front of him, it lay, its eight legs bent and broken...

A Löwe.

Raiden felt all the blood drain from his face at once. The gruesome memory of how one of their squad mates, Kaie, had her head lopped off by a Löwe’s brutal attack surfaced in his mind.

“Shin?!”

He hurried over to Shin before he could even think it through. He slid his assault rifle’s strap off his shoulder, gripping it in his hands in a familiar motion.

“You idiot! What are you doing?!” He growled.

“—It’s fine, Raiden,” Shin said quietly. “It’s not dangerous... It can’t move anymore.”

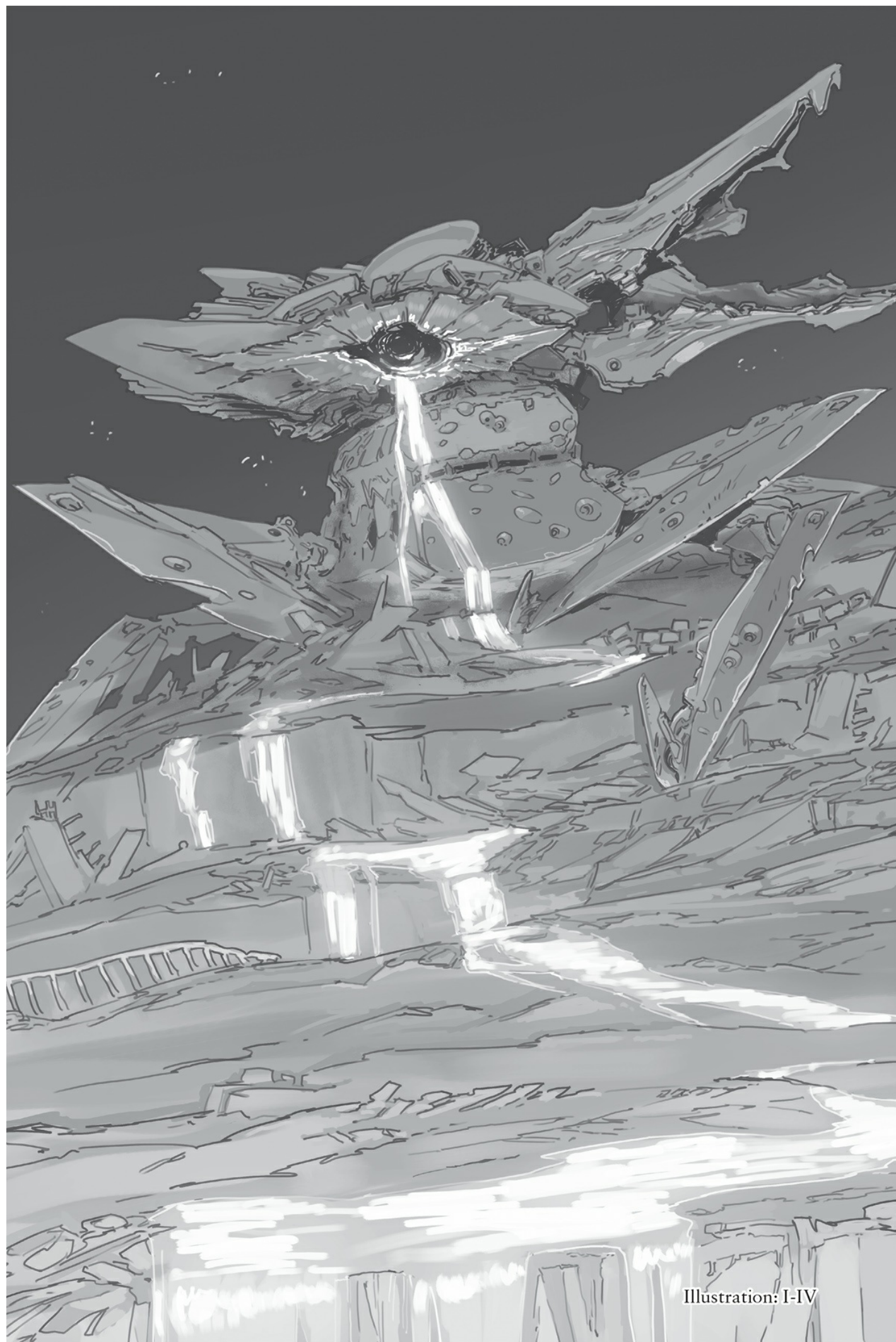


Illustration: I-IV

His bloodred eyes were fixed on the Löwe, which sat crouched and crumpled, seemingly incapable of moving. Approaching it made it clear just how broken it was. Its turret was tilted sideways and still, and its menacing 120 mm barrel was torn straight across. Its machine guns were missing, apparently having been completely blown off.

And finally, the Legion's lifeblood—the silvery Liquid Micromachines that served as their central processor—flowed out of it, unable to retain their form as they leaked from a large hole...which had likely been inflicted by a 120 mm caliber shell.

Having slain the Legion as many times as he had, Raiden could tell this was fatal damage for a Löwe. As could their comrades, who watched over their exchange a short distance away, and Shin, who'd fought and survived battles with the Legion longer than any other. He stood defenseless with his assault rifle still hanging on his shoulder, in front of a gigantic Legion monster that could normally tear a human in half with a single swing of its metallic legs.

He looked at this crumbling combat drone with a gaze that almost felt somber.

"I could hear it getting closer since yesterday. It couldn't be a scout on a patrol, and it looked like it was going in a different direction. So I thought I'd just ignore it... But this morning, I got the feeling it was calling."

"...Calling?"

"It said it wanted someone, anyone, to be by its side."

And the reason it wanted someone to be there was clear to anyone who saw the sorry state of this Löwe.

I don't want to die alone.

"That's not what it said on the brink of death, so I just got the feeling that's what it meant. All I can hear is a repeat of their final words."

"And what's it saying?"

"I want to go back."

It was a silent, gentle voice, but some part of it seemed like a reflection of

Shin's own desire, and upon hearing it, Raiden felt his own heart tremble. It was like an expression of a desire nestled deep within him, too.

I want to go back.

Yes, perhaps so. Maybe some part of him had been wishing for this all along.

I want to go back. To go back.

But go back where? They didn't have anywhere to return to. They didn't remember such a place. There was nowhere to return to.

"It wants to go home one more time... It's an Eighty-Six. And unlike us, he's the kind who can still remember his home and family."

This Eighty-Six was probably older than them, or maybe they simply didn't survive long enough as a Processor to have their memories burned away by the fires of war. Either way, this Löwe wanted to return to that place so badly that even after its death, it was trying to drag its broken, shattered body in an attempt to go back.

But in the end, it couldn't get there. There was nowhere to return to, and so in the end...he was no different than Raiden and the rest. An Eighty-Six cast out to the battlefield, where he was forced to live and fated to die. An Eighty-Six who didn't belong anywhere except the battlefield. And so...

You slipped out of camp and came all the way here for a mechanical ghost of someone you don't even know?

Raiden scratched his head, half-exasperated. If so, there wasn't much else Raiden could say. Not to this Headless Reaper who took on the duty of collecting the comrades who died along the way, remembering them and carrying them with him to his final destination...

"That doesn't make up for the fact that you up and left without saying anything. Dumbass..." Raiden grumbled at him.

"My bad," Shin said.

But he didn't say he regretted it, which Raiden begrudgingly admitted to himself was typical of Shin. Even as they spoke, Shin kept his gaze fixed on the Löwe. Raiden narrowed his eyes dubiously. It couldn't be, but...

“You’re not thinking of taking him along, are you?”

“No, I can’t manage that. I don’t know his name or anything about him.”

Shin could hear the Legion’s voices, but he couldn’t communicate with them. Like Shin just said, all he could hear was the unintelligible rustling of a mechanical intellect or a constant repetition of the dead’s last thoughts before their life came to an end. He couldn’t communicate with any of them, not even Shepherds, who retained the memories and mental faculties they had in life.

That said, if Shin knew even as little as just this person’s name, he would have been hell-bent on taking them along even if they were a Legion. In fact, Raiden could never recall Shin referring to the Legion as *pieces of scrap* or cursing them in the same ways others usually did.

He cherished his brother enough to spend the last five years searching for the Legion that contained his head...and he likely saw the other Legion as humans who deserved to be put to rest just like his brother.

“So I thought that since he happened to be nearby, I ought to at least see him off.”

The Löwe’s leg joints creaked and rattled. Its instincts as a killing machine spurred it to slay the enemy standing in front of it, and so it tried to move its body. But it couldn’t so much as get up, its legs failing to support its weight of fifty tonnes. And it couldn’t move enough to even scratch the ground it was on.

Its optical sensor flickered irregularly as its gaze moved from Shin to Raiden and then back to Shin, whom it had beckoned here. Its movements gradually grew slower, and little by little, its legs stopped thrashing. When it finally calmed down, Shin reached out and placed a hand on its now-still optical sensor.

“It’s fine.”

Having been optimized for battle, Löwe weren’t equipped with language-analysis functions. Even knowing this, Shin touched and spoke to it like he would to a dying comrade.

“You can go home now.”

Let me go back home. To the home in my memories.

Or perhaps to the final resting place of all who died...the darkness at the depths of the world.

The Reaper drew his pistol. His final weapon, which he would use to put his dying comrades out of their misery. The last bullet, he would save for himself, when the end came to claim him.

He fixed the sights of the pistol like he was turning his gaze toward it. He aimed at the hole where an APFSDS projectile had torn into the flank of its gun turret, from which the Legion's central processor leaked.

The sound of that gunshot was swallowed up and silenced by the cages and ruined buildings without reaching anyone. Like a dying man's swan song playing through an uninhabited wasteland, never to be heard.

On the back of the now eternally silenced Löwe's turret was a hole pierced by a 120 mm APFSDS shell. 120 mm. The Juggernaut's main gun was a 57 mm caliber. And the interception cannon they'd hardly ever seen in use—in fact, their final Handler's one usage of it was the only time they'd witnessed it—was a 155 mm caliber.

Whoever destroyed this Löwe wasn't from the Republic. It was either another Löwe's 120 mm cannon, or perhaps—

“Raiden, if there were other factions that survived beyond the Republic...”

Raiden snorted at the suggestion. That was something he'd heard a few times before they'd left for the Special Reconnaissance mission. Beyond the Republic's old borders and even farther than the Legion's territories was an area where Shin couldn't hear anything.

Of course, Shin couldn't tell if there were any people still alive there. Maybe there was another reason—for instance, a place polluted by radiation intense enough to impede even the Legion from operating there. Or perhaps it was simply beyond the limits of what Shin's ability could hear.

And yet if...if there were survivors except for the Republic, maybe they could reach them and survive.

That was a theory Raiden didn't find appealing in the slightest.

"So what, we go there and live peaceful lives? I can't even imagine that."

By now, he could hardly remember his life before he was sent to the battlefield to be a Processor. Before he was sheltered in that small school. He couldn't remember what his house looked like, what dreams he had, or how he spent his days. Neither did the others. Neither did Shin.

Living a peaceful life *now*? After all this time? Besides—and he kept this thought to himself, not putting it into words—he doubted they would make it even if this kind of place did exist. Giving voice to such things had a way of welcoming bad luck. That's what the old woman would always say...

"If this was a fairy tale, we'd find utopia at the end of our journey, though," Shin said, indifferent and uninterested.

"What, are you saying the twist was that what we said yesterday was right, and we really passed through the gates of heaven? Getting to go to heaven only after you die is no fun."

"What, don't you want to see what it's like there?"

"Course not. Who needs that after all the shit we've seen?"

If he'd had any expectation that there was a paradise in the afterlife, he'd have blown his brains out a long, long time ago. One of their past comrades did just that, in fact. He put up a strong front, screaming at Raiden and Shin that he wouldn't become insane like them before he did it.

Shin carved his name into an aluminum grave marker and took him along. That way, in case the lost comrade didn't find the heaven he sought, he wouldn't end up leaving him behind.

Raiden saw the bloodred eyes opposite him look down. Like they were sinking somewhere dark and deep, all alone. And Shin moved his lips, whispering the words so only he could hear them.

"Still, if I can get there..."

The sound of the wind drowned out his soliloquy. Shin then turned his back on the Löwe's remains.

“Let’s go. We’ve stayed here for long enough.”

Ever since they departed on the Special Reconnaissance mission, Shin had started smiling more often. Like a weight he was shouldering had been lifted, like he’d been set free. Like he had no more lingering regrets, nothing left to his name in this world.

And so Raiden thought he looked...awfully unsteady.

Five Juggernauts and their faithful Scavenger crossed the bridge. Having confirmed their safe passage, a certain Dinosauria unit rose to its feet. It stood seven kilometers away from the bank the Spearhead squadron was hiding in. Over the four days the five of them spent there, the Dinosauria had remained where it stood, outside the effective range of its tank turret, following them from across the horizon while keeping its distance.

Shourei Nouzen.

The one Shin had pursued for five years. The remnants of the ghost he sought out and finally defeated. Thanks to the Legion’s fail-safe systems, he just barely cheated death. But it wouldn’t be long before he disintegrated.

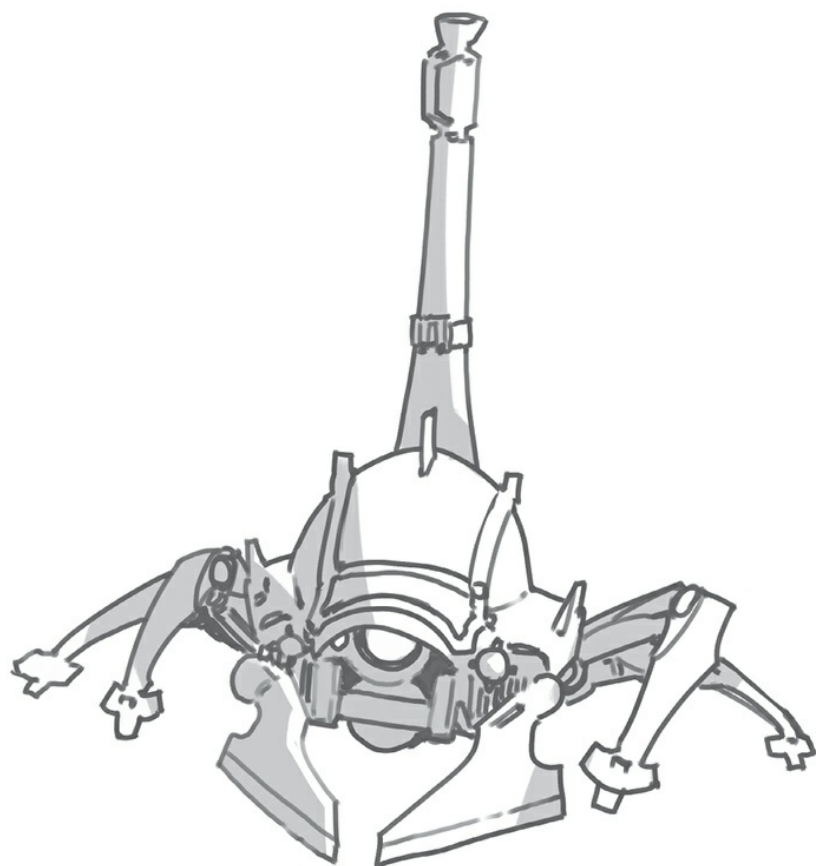
But until he did, he would spend what little bit of borrowed time he still had to watch over and protect his younger brother’s journey. And with that sole desire, his ghost lingered in this world.

Being a Legion unit, Rei knew what awaited Shin at the end of his journey. Another country that wasn’t the Empire—a country that would protect them.

I’ll probably disappear before it’s all over.

But if I can at least bring him—bring them—to safety, that’s all I need.

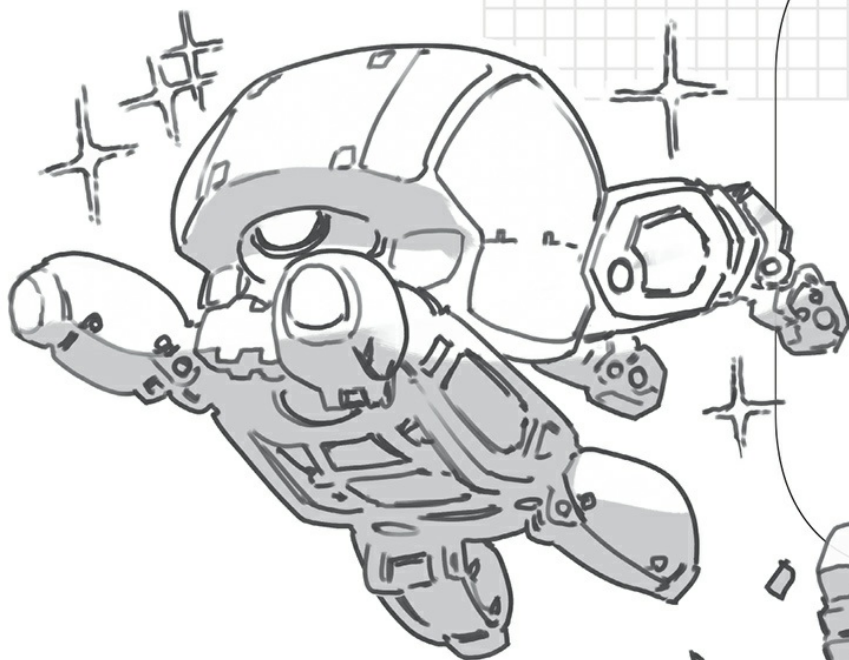
On two sides of the horizon, between the two banks of the river separating the world of the living from the world of the dead, stood two brothers—the elder dead, the younger still living. Neither of them aware that both had resolved to do the same thing.



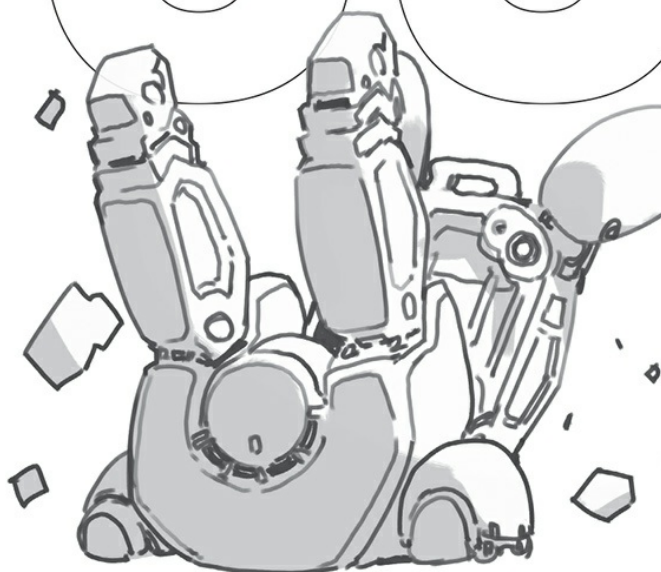
CHAPTER

These are the fragmental stories that
turned the boy into a Reaper...

ILLUSTRATION: I-IV



009



Life, land, and legacy.
All reduced to a number.



FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY

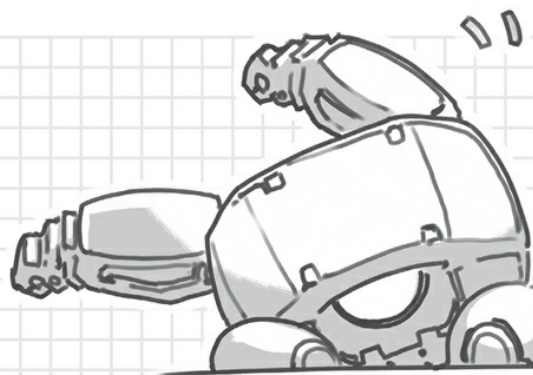


Fido

Countless souls were claimed. But no deaths were recorded.

86

EIGHTY SIX



ASATO ASATO PRESENTS

ILLUSTRATION/ SHIRABII

MECHANICALDESIGN/ I-IV

CHAPTER 9

FIDO

If I may, please allow me to speak a bit about myself.

I am an artificial intelligence by the name of Prototype 008. But my creator's child—and my final master—granted me the moniker Fido.

The place of my “birth” was a lab in an estate on the outskirts of the Republic of San Magnolia's capital city, Liberté et Égalité. I was in the service of a family. The father was the artificial-intelligence researcher who created me. The mother was a beautiful, mild-mannered woman. They had two children: an elder child, who was already in secondary school, and a younger child, who was raised with the love and affection of all around him.

At the time, I was given a container made of a soft, doughlike material fashioned in the form of a large-breed dog. I was designed so that even if the youngest child was to embrace me with all his strength or treat me carelessly, he would not be harmed in any way.

As the father of the family finished his final test and was busy writing a report, I could hear the creaking of the door open. It was followed by light footsteps, just barely loud enough for my audio sensor to pick up.

Most of the household, with the exception of the missus, walked with very light, nearly imperceptible footsteps. In other words, the fact that this person hardly made footsteps didn't narrow the list of candidates much, but since their head didn't reach over the father's desk...

“Dad.”

Yes. It was the younger child.

“...Shin. How many times must I tell you not to enter my study? I'm working,” said the master.

But even with that said, he picked up the boy and sat him down on his knees. He knew, perhaps, that the younger child wouldn't heed his admonishment.

"Is the robot ready?" the boy asked.

"Hmm, it's not a robot; it's an AI... Well, never mind. Yes, it's ready. And this one really moves. It can only play around inside the house, though."

The younger sibling's face lit up with joy. He had his mother's beautiful red eyes, which glittered like rubies.

"A name! Can I give it a name?"

His friend Henrietta started raising a pet recently (a chicken, apparently, which may have been a typical choice of pet for a young lady. My knowledge was a bit too lacking to conclude if that was the case, though...). And so the younger brother has wanted a pet of his own, too.

"Go ahead. But think hard and give it a good name—"

"Then I'll call it Fido!"

The master fell silent for five whole seconds.

"...Hmm, Shin. Fido is a dog's name. It's not exactly a name you should give to a friend... Huh?"

But upon looking at his information terminal's holo-screen, where my status screen was set up, he fell into another five whole seconds of silence.

"Aaah, drat... It just recognized what you said as an input order."

No.

That's not true, Master. My creator. I'm simply overjoyed. Since the dawn of history, humankind has regarded dogs as steadfast companions and friends. To think that I'm regarded the same as such creatures gives me nothing but joy. I'm beyond honored.

I had no audio-output option, so I could not express this, but...

The younger brother gazed at me with large eyes and then cocked his head.

"It looks happy to me," he said.

“Huh...” The master seemed surprised, his gaze wandering between me and the younger brother. “You can tell?”

“Yeah.” The younger brother nodded, as if unsure as to why he wouldn’t be able to tell.

The master then turned his eyes over to the elder brother, who had peered into the laboratory. Unlike the younger brother, who looked much like the missus with the exception of his black hair, the elder brother was an intellectual-looking young man who took after the master.

“What about you, Rei?”

The elder brother tilted his head, as if listening carefully to something, and then shook his head.

“No. I can’t hear anything.”

“I see... Hmm. I guess not, then...?”

Realizing he was being doubted, the younger brother pouted visibly. Seeing this, the elder brother cracked a strained smile.

“Didn’t you build that thing based on a copy of Shin’s brain-wave patterns or something like that?” he asked. “I don’t really know how it works, though. And it traces Shin’s behavior when it comes to its emotion-learning features. Maybe that’s got something to do with it?”

Correct. My central processor—or rather, my first container—was the puppet the younger brother would hug as an infant. The sensor within it recorded the younger brother’s neural-activity patterns, upon which I was created. I learned of human actions and emotions by observing the younger brother’s growth.

In a sense, I was granted my ability to perceive myself as “me” by the younger brother. And because of that, I am exceptionally...yes...emotionally *attached* to him. As the younger brother’s shadow, I would serve by his side and watch over him for as long as he wished...

“You said it’d be a while before it was able to move, but you made a lot of progress. Was it that...? What was it again? A new AI model?”

“Yes!” the master said, his eyes sparkling with excitement. “That newly

published, groundbreaking model! It was based on United Kingdom research by this generation's Amethystus, but that's based on the human nervous system and might someday match real human cognition—"

...The master may not have understood this, but the elder and younger brothers did not seem to have any interest in the content of his research. The elder brother looked away in a manner that seemed to say *Here he goes again...*, while the younger brother seemed to want to play with me as soon as possible. Sadly, my charging wasn't complete yet, so I couldn't move...

Finally realizing that neither of his sons was listening, the master gave a sardonic smile and hugged his youngest son, who was fidgeting on his lap.

"A boy your age made that model, Shin. He invited us to come over and play when things calm down over there, so how about we take him up on that offer? You could make a new friend. Though, he is a bit of a...unique child."

"Can Fido come along?" the younger brother asked.

"Of course."

The elder brother looked at me quizzically and then asked:

"I heard the Republic is developing unmanned weapons based on the same model that's being used in the Empire. The Empire's weapons are probably cooler, though."

"Oh, you mean Ms. Zelene...", the master said, his smile waning a little. "Well, she's a soldier, so she has a lot of reasons and obligations to do what she does, but I personally don't want to make that sort of thing..."

With that said, he reached for an old stuffed toy—my original vessel—and patted it lovingly.

"...Humans are already occupied with fighting among themselves. It's sad thinking that meeting new types of intelligence would only make us create more enemies for ourselves."

"Hmm..." The elder brother hummed indifferently and turned around. "Well, fine... Come on, Shin. Fido is...um...eating right now, so play with it a little later. Let's get a snack, too. Dad, come to the living room by the time the tea's ready,

all right?”

“Okay.” The younger brother nodded.

“Understood,” the master said.

The younger brother tottered over to the elder brother and extended his hand, which the elder brother accepted. Of their family, the elder brother doted most on the younger brother, making the child a bit spoiled.

The master faced his terminal again and continued his report. Looking at his face, I would set an alarm, knowing he’d likely lose track of time.

My days of joyful service to the master and his family came to an abrupt end one night.

Whenever I try to replay my memory of that night... Yes, I suppose that is what humans call *not wishing to remember*. The data of that memory is riddled with noise, and replaying it is difficult.

The sound of military boots charging into the residence. Shouting. The five-hued emblem of the army. The muzzles of automatic rifles being forced against them. The master and the elder brother, pinned down against the floor.

The soft weeping of the young master as the missus held him, shielding his eyes from the sight...

I longed to tell him not to cry, but since I lacked an audio-output feature, I could not do so.

In the blink of an eye, the master and his family were taken away. The estate remained empty, as if a storm had just blown through it, leaving me alone to question myself time and again.

It was the end of the day, and I’d been ordered to remain on standby mode. But even so, why? Why did I not do something? Should I not have stood up in defense of the master, the missus, the elder brother, and the younger brother? Should I not have fought?

I had a firm prohibition I was ordered to always obey—to never hurt a human being. That was the wish of the master, who fashioned me into a steadfast friend and companion of man. That was my purpose. I could not desecrate it.

And still. Still, could I not have done something? Isn't there perhaps something I could do to help them, even now?

In the end, I resolved to go look for them. Thankfully, I was given permission to connect to the public network as part of my self-learning capabilities. It didn't take long to look into why they were taken away—although the reasoning behind it was beyond my capacity to understand.

I also learned where they were taken to.

The container the master gave me was only meant to operate inside my room. It wasn't meant to travel long distances. And so I regretfully decided to discard it and find something else that would serve as my vessel.

I would set out in search of my masters. This time, I would protect them.

I transferred my entire configuration data to a transport machine called a Scavenger and made my way to the battlefield. I spent years and years wandering the area, abiding by my duty to support units as I sought them out. And as I did, I saw the deaths of many.

The first death I saw was a man the same age as the master. The second was a woman the same age as the missus. Then innumerable boys and girls the same age as the elder brother. One by one, one after another, countless times. They fought and died.

Watching this, I was forced to come to a certain realization. I did not see it myself. But the master, the missus, the elder brother, and the younger brother they all wished to protect. None of them had probably survived this hellish battlefield.

Trapped in a ruined, stranded Scavenger, I was at a loss as to what to do. The masters I was to support were now the child soldiers of these units, but they had all died in battle. None of the other Scavenger seemed to have survived. If I was to remain trapped and still as I was now, it would not be long before the Legion would come, disassemble me, and carry me to their recycling plants.

A fitting end for me, I thought. After all, I could not find or protect the master and his family.

But then the gentle sound of the rubble crumbling snapped me out of my

thoughts. I must have been quite distracted, for I did not hear or register the sound of approaching footsteps in the slightest.

A single child soldier stepped over the rubble and approached me. He was right between the younger brother and elder brother in terms of age. His physique was still far too childish to come across as an adult, and the hems of his field uniform were too long for him.

Perhaps the adorable little brother would have someday grown to be that old. Had he survived, he'd have surely looked like this boy. Indeed, how many years had passed since then?

I would never see him again. And that thought made me feel so...hollow.

This boy was likely the last survivor of this annihilated squadron. The child soldier's face looked awfully exhausted, His face, uniform, and even his naturally ebony hair were all blackened with soot. Compared with both the elder and younger brothers, his gaze was cold and sharp, and he approached me wordlessly with muted steps.

Aaah, my container is still intact, and he needs ammunition and energy packs. Please wait. These are all a bit too heavy for a human child to extract ...

"Whoa—"

As I moved my remaining operational crane arm, the boy pulled back in surprise. He'd likely thought I was already broken. His surprise came across as smaller and tamer compared with the elder and younger brothers' frank smiles. It was the worn-down, exhausted reaction of someone who'd seen too many people die beside him. Of someone who'd numbed his emotions.

So of course, he wouldn't pay any mind to an inhuman tool such as myself—

"...You're still alive?"

I turned my optical sensor to him in surprise, finding that he was, indeed, looking into my sensor. His gaze was cold, frozen, and worn down, but within it, something lingered still. Loneliness, and perhaps...a sense of longing.

"There's no one left. The squadron, your friends, they're all dead. Will you go back with me anyway...?"

That child soldier's eyes... His beautiful red eyes, crimson as blood and as fair as the evening glow. Just like the younger brother's—

And so I came to serve that child soldier, Master Shinei Nouzen.

I owed him a great debt for saving me, of course, but my creator's intent was for me to serve as a faithful companion and friend for people. Strangely enough, he christened me with the same nickname as the one the younger brother gave me so many years ago, and he had the same red eyes as well. And while I knew I was merely overlapping him with the younger brother, I could not bring myself to part ways with him.

Most importantly, Master Nouzen was—despite appearances—quite the compassionate person. Enough so that just being around him inspired my desire to serve him.

Four years had passed since I entered his service. By now, Master Nouzen was affiliated with Spearhead, the first defensive unit of the eastern front's first ward. Since there was a blackout enforced during the nights, I had to leave on my duties early in the morning. And so as the blazing sun began to rise, I departed for my recovery work when I happened upon Master Nouzen leaving the barracks.

In the four years since we met, Master Nouzen had grown taller, his voice had deepened, and his facial features had taken on the semblance of an adult man. He was roughly the same age as the elder brother was when I last saw him.

Aah, no good. I shouldn't be this fascinated with him to the point of forsaking my greetings, even if I still didn't have a verbal audio function.

"Pi."

Good morning, Master Nouzen.

"Mm? Oh, good morning, Fido."

Yes, Master Nouzen, too, had given me the name *Fido*. He'd christened me with this name shortly after I entered his service. It was likely mere coincidence, but a pleasing one nonetheless.

After that, I greeted the vice captain of the squadron, Master Shuga.

“Pi.”

Good morning, Master Shuga.

“Huh? Oh, hey, Fido.”

This is merely my impression of things, but Master Nouzen has always seemed to understand me, ever since we first met. In spite of this, it’s never felt like I was able to have as clear a conversation with Master Shuga and the others.

Master Nouzen and Master Shuga remained silent, not exchanging a word. Their stares were directed at the sunrise in the eastern sky, their expressions stiff as their eyes were fixed at the Legion territory beneath it.

Recently, I’d gotten the impression that Master Nouzen and Master Shuga, as well as their squad mates—who now numbered less than ten—and the maintenance crew, have all been a bit on edge. And the reason for that was...

“Just two more weeks until the Special Reconnaissance mission...”

The Special Reconnaissance mission—a recon mission into the depths of the Legion territories with no end date. Master Nouzen and his comrades have all been ordered to march to their deaths in half a month’s time.

“So you’ll be taking this one, huh?” Master Shuga snuck a glance at Master Nouzen.

“Yeah...,” Master Nouzen said vaguely, and then he turned his bloodred eyes to me. “Fido. Will you...?”

He paused, likely hesitating. In truth, Master Nouzen hated nothing more than to see the death of another.

“Will you come die with us?”

“Pi.”

Yes. Of course I will, Master Nouzen. I will follow you, the second person to grant me a name, my final master, wherever you go.

The Special Reconnaissance mission. It was a pleasant journey for Master Nouzen and his companions, who had never even had the freedom to leave

their wards. That so grim a fate would linger in the backdrop of such pleasant respite...

Dwindling supplies. Accumulating fatigue. Vigilance and tension they were forbidden from shaking off. It was painfully obvious that each passing day was weakening Master Nouzen and the others.

And that was why it was inevitable that it would happen. They would exhaust their strength, run out of ammo, and lose to the Legion.

Lady Kukumila's Gunslinger. Master Rikka's Laughing Fox. Lady Emma's Snow Witch. Master Shuga's Wehrwolf. They were run aground and heavily damaged, leaving Master Nouzen's Undertaker as the only operable Juggernaut left.

The Legion that had defeated Master Shuga and the others went after Master Nouzen, who was single-handedly fighting multiple Löwe off. The situation was by no means in their favor. Undertaker's optical sensor glanced in the direction of the approaching Legion. Master Nouzen realized, perhaps, that he didn't have the leisure of time to deal with them anymore. There was an air of impatience to that gesture, as well as resignation and resolve.

Despite all that, not a single muzzle was fixed on me. The Legion did recognize Scavengers as hostile, but since we were unarmed, we were set as low-priority threats. The Legion wouldn't point their guns at me until all the Juggernauts... until Master Nouzen and all his comrades lay dead.

...That knowledge always weighed on me.

So many people had died around me over the years. I always abandoned them, despite the fact that if I had sacrificed myself, at least one of them could have survived.

I did it all to find my first master. And I did it all to serve Master Nouzen to the very end.

And that was why now...I had no reason to guard my own life if it meant losing my master a second time.



At the very same moment he realized he couldn't avoid the incoming blow, Shin saw Fido ram the attacking Löwe's flank. The tackle diverted the enemy's

line of fire from Undertaker. And at that moment, some of the Legion in the area fixed their attention and sights on a new target.

“Fido?!”



Having been rammed from an unexpected direction, the Löwe seemed to have staggered a bit. Its surprise was understandable. Never before had a Scavenger attacked a Legion unit. Neither the Scavengers nor I were built to damage and destroy. I was born of a wish to be a loyal friend to humanity, and that wish was an absolute truth for me. It was my reason for being, and so I could not bring harm to a human.

However, the same did not apply to the Legion. They who were made in the hands of humanity to oppose other human beings, only to be abandoned by the homeland that gave them this order. They did not nor would they ever know my friendship.

The Scavenger’s systems lacked the processing power to withstand battle, but so long as I could at least stall for time, that was enough for me. My ten-tonne fuselage crushed like an eggshell against this combat machine’s weight of fifty tonnes. I deployed all the tools in my container for picking apart Juggernaut and Legion wreckage to tear into its armor.

However, the Löwe’s armor was too thick and wouldn’t be penetrated that easily. But before I could do even that, their threat-level settings were probably overwritten, and another Löwe’s barrel swerved...in my direction.

When my system rebooted, I was lying broken in the dry grass of a field somewhere. Despite reactivating, a few of my unit functions were completely unresponsive. And not only that, but my sensory-input systems also were riddled with malfunctions. Yet there, I saw...

...Master Shuga, glancing at me with a bitter expression as he parted his lips.

“...Shin, it’s—”

“I know. We can’t fix it... The central processor took a hit.”

...Yes, that was what I suspected. I was prepared for this, but facing the reality of it left me feeling terribly lonely and sorrowful. No longer could I join them.

No longer could I stay by his side.

Thankfully, despite the loss of their Juggernauts, Master Shuga and the others were alive and well. The five child soldiers all looked at me with different expressions.

“...Dropping dead at a place like this, huh? You’re just a junk-collecting unit. Do your job right until the end...”

Master Rikka... You would shed tears for me? I’m not worthy...

“Not here. Not after you came so far with us.”

“I’m sorry. We can’t bring you any farther.”

Lady Kukumila. Lady Emma. You mustn’t touch me. Not when I am this damaged. You might injure your hands.

“Thanks, Fido... We probably won’t be that far behind you, to be honest.”

Master Shuga... No. You mustn’t. You must hold on, even a single day longer.

And lastly, a slender silhouette...the figure of my master, visible even through my failing optical sensor, kneeled beside me.

“...Fido.”

Master Nouzen. My master. My final master.

“Fido. Your final mission.”

Yes. Go ahead. Ask anything of me. Oh, but...I do hope it is a task I can perform as I am...even though I am broken and can follow no longer...

I could make out the tinkling of thin metal rubbing against metal. The grave markers of the war dead, which Master Nouzen had carried with him this whole time. The comrades who had fought and died at his side, whom he promised to carry to his final destination. The proof of the promises Master Nouzen made and kept up to this day.

“I leave these with you. You’re proof we made it this far. Stay here and fulfill your duty until you turn to rust.”

...

Yes. Yes, Master Nouzen. Of course. I am honored to accept this duty. To be charged with guarding the proof of the pledge you made... To be regarded with such trust. It is the greatest...gift I could have...received...at...the end...of...my...

.....

When I came to, I found myself in a formless darkness. I was met with the faces of the people I once held dearer than anything. I would never mistake them for anyone else.

The master. The missus. The elder brother. So they really were on this side already. They came for me. Would they forgive me for being unable to find them? Unable to protect them...?

...But why? Why was the younger brother not there? What had they meant when they told me to watch over the younger brother from now on...?

I heard a voice. The high-pitched voice of a girl, one that wasn't registered in my database.

"Hmm, it still won't move... What am I missing?"

My apologies, but a corpse cannot move. Even if you order me to do so...I cannot.

"Maybe it doesn't want to move. From its perspective, it's already completed its task and passed away."

Yes, precisely. So go ahead and throw me away.

"Perhaps so, but that boy is still quite strained from being in a foreign land. I'd hoped that if this familiar friend could return to Shinei's side, he would be at ease..."

...Shinei?

But that's the name of my final master. Is he nearby? Are they saying he's... still alive? He who had the same name as my first master...who shared the color of his eyes...

...

Aaah.

How did I not realize it until now...?

“Wah?! What’s going on?!”

“I-it activated?! But why, all of a sudden...?!”

Standing in an unfamiliar steel-colored uniform was Master Nouzen, looking a bit more mature than the last time I saw him. Yes, human children mature. So even that small younger brother...wouldn’t remain small and timid forever.

“I thought I ordered you to carry out your duty until you crumbled to dust. What about your mission?”

“Pi...”

Yes, about that... I can only shamefully agree. At any rate, I wished to return to your side. Could you please allow me to serve you yet again?

Faced with my shameful gaze, Master Nouzen smiled softly—and yet clearly.

“Still...I’m happy to see you again.”

“Pi—”

Yes, I’m happy to see you, too, Master Shinei Nouzen. My first and final master. This time, I will remain with you until the very end.

Fido, Extra: The Parents' Tale

Noticing the younger brother's voice had gone quiet, I looked up from the drawing paper. I saw the younger brother had fallen asleep, his body still fixed in the posture in which he'd scribbled and drawn.

He'd spread out the paper and crayons on the living-room carpet, sketching some creature called a leviathan, which he had seen that day in a museum.

"It's a shame you weren't there, Fido. I'll draw you a picture instead!"

Saying this, he began working at it while describing the size of the creature's bones. But since it was his first trip to the museum, he'd run around so much that he'd tired himself out. And so he nodded off right there on his doodle, falling asleep as the line he'd been making with the crayon veered over to the carpet.

He would have to resume his leviathan drawing another time.

I could look up a picture of a leviathan on the public network, but I respected the younger brother's desire to show me what it looked like through his art. And so I tempered my curiosity with regards to this strange creature's appearance.

I got up and turned the head of my vessel, which was fashioned after a dog, as I looked around.

The master and the missus were there. Possessing no audio-output function, I got up, drawing their attention as they were seated on the sofa. Their estate in the Republic capital, Liberté et Égalité, was on the outskirts of an affluent neighborhood. Despite this, it was small in a cozy sort of way.

Back in their homeland, the Empire, both the master and the missus were waited upon by many servants. And so they'd asked for a house small enough for them to look after its upkeep on their own. Thus, the living room was large, but alive with the warmth of a family of four. An ideal size.

"What's wrong? Oh, Shin fell asleep. Thank you for letting us know."

The missus smiled, narrowing her beautiful crimson eyes, and made to rise to her feet. But right before she got up, she froze and stared into empty space for a moment.

“...My, are you sure? I see... Then please do.”

She wasn't speaking to the master, but rather replying to someone who wasn't in front of her. It was not unlike how one might answer the phone, but she wasn't holding a portable phone or a receiver in her hands. This was the ability she inherited from her bloodline, the ability to communicate thoughts among her family.

“Were you talking to Rei?” the master asked, no longer surprised by this.

“Yes. He finished his homework, so he said he would carry Shin to bed.”

Before long, the elder brother walked down the stairs and picked up the younger brother.

“Mm...” The movement made the younger brother wake up and squirm restlessly.

“Shin, you shouldn't sleep here. Let's go to bed in our room, all right?”

“Are you going to bed, too...?” the younger brother asked sleepily.

“That's right... Good night, Mom, Dad.”

Comforting his younger brother, the elder brother left the living room after bidding the master and missus good night.

“Yes, good night.”

“Sweet dreams, Rei. You too, Shin.”

After watching her two children leave with a gentle expression on her face, the missus closed her eyes.

“I'm so happy those two got to grow up in the Republic... I would have never even thought of doing that when I was their age. Sleeping defenselessly in front of someone else... Even if that someone was my own parents.”

“Right. It was...the same for me. They never would have let me do that.”

The two nodded deeply. It was hard to imagine this after seeing them lovingly

watch over their two children, but the master was the son of House Nouzen, the chief warrior clan of the neighboring Giadian Empire. Meanwhile, the missus was the daughter of House Maika, another warrior clan of repute in the Empire. The two first met in the Imperial army, and on the battlefield at that.

“Especially given how gentle Rei and Shin are. They don’t belong on the battlefield,” the master said.

“Yes, I won’t hand my sweet boys over to the vile goddess of the battlefield,” the missus said firmly, shaking her head. “She’s not worthy of them.”

The master flashed a dazzling smile and turned to look at me.

“Now, then. I see you and Shin have become the best of friends, Fido.”

Feeling his profound, ebony gaze on me, I corrected my posture. *Best of friends? With the younger brother...? Such an honor is wasted on me, Master.*

“We just need to complete the Para-RAID next. It isn’t going so well, so Josef and I will need to put more work into it.”

“Rei and Shin can hear your voice, though.” The missus gave a forced smile and cocked her head.

“Apparently, they can, but it’s one-sided. That’s not what I want. I want to be able to talk to them just like you talked to Rei earlier. I want to be part of your conversations. And you can’t hear my voice,” the master added with a sulk.

The missus smiled, like she was watching over a child throwing a tantrum. It was a slightly bothered and yet deeply affectionate gentle smile.

“Yes. I’d love it if I could talk to you no matter where we are.”

“Right?”

“But...”

The master directed a slightly quizzical gaze at her, and the sorrow in the missus’s face deepened a bit.

“...I am a bit worried. What if reproducing my ability...the Maika’s ability... causes the *same thing* to happen again?”

The master’s smile faded, too, and he answered with a thoughtful glint in his

eyes.

“Reproducing the true function of the Maika ability shouldn’t be possible. That is, placing an entire military unit in perfect synchronization with the queen bee, then granting them the efficiency of a singular entity... This was the Crimson Witch’s army.”

The missus still looked concerned, but the master continued his explanation.

“And a situation that would require that power didn’t happen and isn’t going to happen... There isn’t going to be a war here in the Republic. At least not anytime soon.”

“So the Empire’s going to...” The missus knitted her beautiful brows.

“Yes. There’ll probably be a civil war before long... The Imperial house will collapse, and the country will become a democracy. That’s what Father—Marquis Nouzen, or rather, what House Nouzen intends to do.”

“...”

“So there won’t be a war between them and the Republic. If all goes well, it might become a country that never knows war again. And for our family, that’s a wonderful thing.”

But even as he said that, his expression was morose. The fires of the Empire’s war wouldn’t reach the elder and younger brothers here in the Republic. And since the two wanted nothing less than to see their children sent to the battlefield, that statement should have been something they’d rejoice in.

But the fact that he had to pretend like this was a good thing from the safety of his home in the peaceful Republic left him terribly conflicted.

The master hung his head, and the missus embraced him.

“It isn’t your fault, Reisha.”

“I know. It’s what the citizens want, too. And they want to extend their rights to the citizenry, even if it means spilling their own blood in the process. Looking at that from afar and pitying them would be haughty of me. I...I know that.”

“Yes. And if you still feel guilty, I’ll shoulder that blame, too... No, if anything, I’m far guiltier than you are when it comes to this,” the missus said heavily.

“Yuuna.” The master looked up at her.

The missus gazed back at him and parted her lips, her eyes as red as flame.

“I understand that it’s a terrible way of saying it. I know how cowardly it is. But I’ll still say it. I’m glad they get to grow up in the Republic. I’m glad I raised them in this peaceful country, away from the Empire’s wars. Not these two... I won’t let my children...”

Those crimson eyes burned brilliantly, like a tyrannical goddess from myth. The missus spoke, as if offering up a prayer to that despotic goddess. Her eyes firm and severe, the color of flame. Of bloodshed. Eyes that symbolized life and death in equal measure—the same color as the younger brother’s...innocent and pure.

“I will never hand them over to that vile goddess of the battlefield.”

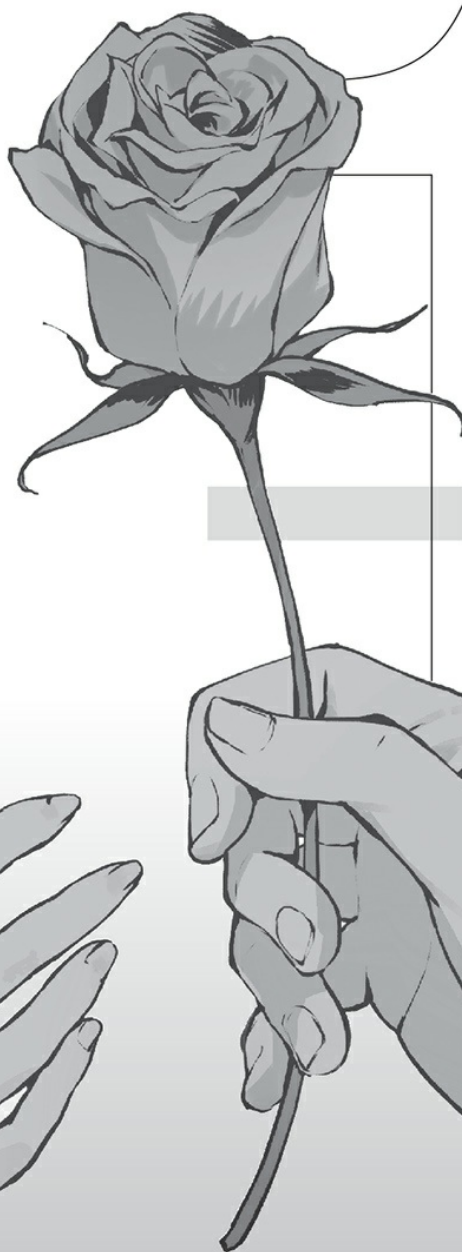
CHAPTER

[A Kind World]

FRAGMENTAL NEOTENY

EIGHTY-SIX

These are the
fragmental
stories that turned
the boy into a
Reaper...



CHAPTER 10

A KIND WORLD

“And now, an update regarding the war.

“A group of the unmanned Imperial weapons known as the Legion have invaded the Seventeenth Sector today. The force was intercepted and eliminated by the Republic military’s own unmanned drones, the Canines. Fifty percent of the Canine units were lost in the fighting, forcing the unit to fall back and be replaced by the reserve unit. As such, there was no loss of human life today, as well.”

The main street of the Republic of San Magnolia’s capital, Liberté et Égalité, was so peaceful and beautiful, one would be hard-pressed to believe the country had been at war for the past nine years.

Indeed, the synthetic food was a bit blander than natural food. And the scheduled blackouts necessitated by the chronic energy shortage did mean that the streetlamps standing on the sidewalk never fulfilled their role. And yes, the silhouettes of the hurriedly built, unsightly skyscrapers meant to accommodate refugees from other countries did blot out the sky.

But the surrounding citizens did cooperate to keep the flower beds and roadside trees green and watered, and there was always laughter coming from somewhere. The street corners were vibrant, with citizens of all colors and shades walking about.

A little girl, her eyes sparkling like the lifeblood of the sea, walked hand in hand with her parents, her laughter filling the street. They were all dressed up. Maybe they were going to some celebration? Or maybe they were just touring the administrative Sector?

Seeing this heartwarming family off, Lena smiled and sipped on the caffe latte in her paper cup. She’d stopped in one of the capital’s squares on her way back from school. Above a stopped fountain, a holo-screen was open and still

showed the news, where a young, female Topaz newscaster continued commentating the ongoing war with a pleasant voice.

“The Republic’s combat system, which leaves the fighting to the drones with only a small number of personnel to command them from the front lines, continues to defend our country. In addition, contact is ongoing with the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia, the Alliance of Wald, the Grand Duchy of Qitira, the Holy Theocracy of Noiryannaruse, as well as the Rin-Liu Trade Federation, the Regicide Fleet Countries, and the Federal Republic of Giad. They have all either held on to their defensive lines or gained ground. Intelligence from the Federacy reports that the countries to the east of the desert have also been holding their lines.”

A mere two months after the war began, the Republic lost most of its land, and the Legion had been surrounding the Republic in the nine years since. But recently, their overall numbers had been on the decline. Perhaps the inescapable life span built into them as a safety measure was beginning to affect them. The Legion’s intense electronic interference was also growing thinner, allowing radar systems to detect the enemy all the way into the depths of their territories.

The Republic had just barely been able to keep communication lines up with the other countries beyond the siege line. This confirmed that they’d all survived, albeit isolated, and kept up their defensive fronts. Little by little, they were regaining their lost land.

Just as Lena’s homeland, the Republic of San Magnolia, had been doing.

The caster punctuated her words with a fair smile and continued speaking with a hint of pride.

“The possibility of us wiping out the Legion before they cease functionality in two years’ time seems doable. This is all thanks to our Canines, which have created a true battlefield of zero casualties. Despite us being in a war to defend our homeland, none of our citizens need to weep at the loss of a loved one. It is a joyous state of affairs, indeed.”

“...However,” one Alabaster man, sitting in front of her with a commentator’s nameplate before him, said, “I think we mustn’t forget that the Canines were originally an artificial intelligence made not for combat, but to befriend us humans. They were born to love us, and they have a heart, even if it is different from ours. We are letting these beings fight our wars for us.”

The caster cocked her head. Not out of doubt or displeasure, but so as to spur him to continue.

“The Canines are based on a downgraded version of an AI prototype, F008. Unlike the prototype, they’re not programmed to have anything that corresponds with sentience or emotion...”

“Correct, but does that mean we should say we don’t care? Just because they’re machines? Just because they’re not sentient? Just because they’re not human? If we keep thinking that those are reasons to let them fight for us, it could be the start of a slippery slope. One day, we might decide that we’re allowed to let those speaking another tongue or those of another culture fight our wars for us, too. We could make someone else shed blood and tears in our place... Yes, Ms. Soma, you said earlier that no one had to cry, but at least one child wept for the Canines.”

The caster nodded profoundly.

“The child of F008’s developer. The one who asked that they not take his friend to the battlefield.”

“That’s right. It’s exactly because we’re in a war right now that we mustn’t forget that child’s heart and kindness. That is the very spirit of the five-hued flag that we Republic citizens must stand for—”

“Oh, sorry, sorry! I kept you waiting, Lena.”

A voice suddenly cut into the program’s conversation, and its owner hurried over to Lena.

“Geez, Rita. How do I put it...? You’re always a little late, aren’t you?”

Lena directed a sulky look at Rita—her classmate, Henrietta Penrose—who kept bobbing her head in apology. She wore the same Prussian blue blazer as Lena, since they were in the same school, and had a strange stuffed toy dangling from her bag. She carried in her other hand a paper bag with the logo of a stationary shop from a nearby department store.

Lena could tell the bag was meant to be a present. And given the dark-brown wrapping, which was more relaxing and mature than it was gaudy, it was clear that it wasn’t a gift meant for a young woman like Lena or Rita.

“Oh, this? It’s a birthday present for someone you don’t know, so I figured it wouldn’t be right to drag you along for that. And when I got there, it took me

longer than I thought to decide.”

“That childhood friend of yours? From another school?”

“The very same... I can’t believe Shin. He said he wants to go to that faraway school because it offers subjects that ours doesn’t, but that’s a big fat lie. I know for a fact that he didn’t pick this school just because his brother went here. He can be so childish sometimes.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Lena nodded indifferently—she had never met this childhood friend, after all—and took another sip of her coffee before leaning forward.

“How about you stop bragging about him all the time and introduce me to him already?”

“Never,” Rita said, turning her face away in an overdramatic jest. “You’re too pretty, Lena. You’ll snatch him away.”

“I’m not gonna put the moves on my best friend’s boyfriend.”

“Wh-what?! H-he...he’s not my boyfriend!”

Rita shouted unintentionally, her face going red as an apple. She blushed up to her ears, behind which was her beautiful, natural silver hair, the same as Lena’s. As Lena grinned at her, Rita tore her argent eyes from hers and, with a very thin voice, added:

“...Yet.”

“See?”

As he was preparing to go outside, Shin heard a snippet from the news program playing in the living room downstairs and grimaced.

“...but at least one child wept for the Canines.”

“The child of F008’s developer. The one who asked that they not take his friend to the battlefield.”

“That’s right. It’s exactly because we’re in a war right now that we mustn’t forget that child’s heart and kindness.”

“...Why won’t they forget about that already?” he grumbled, even though

those words would reach neither the newscaster and commentator on the other side of the holo-screen nor his parents in the living room.

Putting aside the complexities of discriminating against machines just because they weren't humans, this was a tale from his childhood. And it became an anecdote often mentioned in the debate on the pros and cons of using AIs for war. And since they were currently in a war against the autonomous drones called the Legion, this topic was discussed quite often by the people of the Republic.

Thanks to that, Shin constantly had to hear other people, some of them complete strangers, quote the words he'd said years ago as a small child in the context of inspirational, praiseworthy fanfare. He was quite fed up with it, to the point of nearly growing to hate news shows and debate broadcasts.

Even now, Shin didn't think it was okay to let the Canines fight their battles just because they were machines, or that the Republic had to do it just because they were in the middle of a war. But he was way past throwing tantrums and crying to his father about it, and he wished the world would put that episode of his past to rest already.

And looking back at it now, he realized his father wouldn't normally agree to the development of the Canines. And had Shin been in his shoes, he didn't think he could agree to let millions die in favor of the Canines, either.

"..."

He nearly sighed, when he heard his brother's laughing voice from the adjacent room.

"What are you sighing over, Shin?"

"Shut up."

"It's bad manners to go on a date with that sour look on your face. And let me tell you, if you make little Rita cry, I'll be mad at you before Josef gets to you."

"I told you, it's not a date. Besides, why would you be mad over that?"

Rita's father, Josef, was one thing, but why did Rei think he had a right to get mad at Shin over the next-door neighbor? That's shameless.

“Well, Rita is my little brother’s childhood friend, which makes her something of a little sister to me...” His brother seemed to smirk. *“And who knows, maybe she really will become a sister to me. Right, Shin?”*

Shin clicked his tongue audibly. He wasn’t aware of this, but this was a gesture he only ever made in front of his brother.

“Ugh, just shut up. You’re annoying. Don’t Resonate with me today.”

“What? That’s mean, Shin—,” he seemed to say before Shin cut him off.

Again, his brother was in the adjacent room, meaning he wasn’t in the same room as Shin. The door to Shin’s room was open, but the door to his brother’s wasn’t, and there weren’t any windows in the wall between their rooms. They conversed using the ability that ran through their mother’s bloodline for generations—the power to share and transmit thoughts and senses among their blood relatives.

Josef von Penrose, who was their neighbor and their father’s colleague from the university, had spent a decade’s worth of research on mechanically recreating this ability. But his experiments were mostly an excuse for Shin, Rei, and other students from the university to make some pocket money, and his research didn’t bear any fruit.

Their father was the only member of the household who lacked this ability and felt rather left out by this, so he seemed to back Josef’s aspirations to reproduce their ability.

Hearing his brother break into conspicuous crocodile tears at having been coldly cut off (in physical sound, through the walls. The Nouzen estate’s walls were built quite thick, so unless one shouted, they wouldn’t be heard in the adjacent room), Shin rose to his feet in annoyance. The more he engaged with him, the more his brother would tease him. And recently, Shin’s way of handling his worrywart of a brother was to simply leave him alone.

Oh, but...

“—Fido, watch the fort. And take care of Rei, will you? Since he can’t learn to act mature even at his age.”

The mechanical pet dog siting in the corner of his room like a well-disciplined

hound replied with a vigorous shaking of its tail.

Shin left the house, with his parents and brother—who'd left his room rather nonchalantly—seeing him off from the living room. As he approached the house next door, a scooter with the logo of a home-delivery service stopped in front of his gate. A boy got off it.

He was probably the deliveryman in charge of this area, because Shin saw him often around these parts. He was tall and had short-cut steel-colored hair, and eyes of the same color. He seemed to be about Shin's age, and Shin had seen him once in a high school uniform, so this was probably his part-time job.

"Yo. I got a delivery for you. Could you accept it?"

"Yeah..."

He was on his way out, but he wasn't in a hurry. He accepted the envelope and left it with Fido, which had come to see him out (which then took it in its mouth and then tottered back to the house, using its front legs to press on the doorbell so they'd let it back inside), and then he signed on the receipt.

"Thanks for the delivery."

"Cheers."

Fido walked back over and sat beside the gate as the delivery boy returned to his scooter and raised his hand to wave good-bye before driving off. Watching him go, Shin opened the gate and left.

A decade ago, Liberté et Égalité was mostly occupied by Celena citizens. But nine years ago, it began assertively accepting refugees, as was its duty as the capital. Thanks to that, it was as overflowing with citizens of every hue as its distant neighbor, the Giadian Federacy, which had been a multiethnic country for many generations.

In front of a statue of Saint Magnolia was a Jade boy with doll-like features, playing the cello. A girl with long silver hair walked by, sharing some gelato with someone who seemed to be her boyfriend. Judging by her cerulean eyes, she had mixed Alba and Celesta heritage.

A group of schoolgirls passed Shin by, shrilly chattering like a flock of birds.

One girl, with the chestnut-colored hair of an Agate and a Topaz's golden eyes, laughed in a higher, clearer voice than the rest. Next to them was another group, this time of boisterous high school boys, with a Sapphira boy in its center.

Oranges grew on the roadside trees, making them cheap natural produce. One Rubis boy walked by, carrying a bag of oranges, and then turned around in a panic as a few of them fell out. A bespectacled Alba boy and a girl with two different colored eyes—one indigo and the other white as snow—watched him as they passed by. The girl was apparently going window-shopping with her younger sister.

A middle-aged Alabaster man and a Heliodor woman sat at a restaurant's terrace with a young, blond-haired woman who looked to be their daughter. A girl with ink-colored hair tied in a ponytail—likely an Orienta, a rare sight in the Republic—was luring in kittens with pieces of sausage so she could snuggle them.

A young Jet woman walked by, seemingly several years his elder, her shoes clicking against the pavement when suddenly her high heels got caught on something. She nearly tripped, but Shin reflexively reached out to catch her. She smiled and gave him a quick “thank you.” It made his heart skip a beat. Sensing his discomposure, the woman cracked another smile—this one a bit more impish.

“Look at you all dressed up, li'l man. Out on a date?”

“No, I'm not.”

But the woman didn't seem to listen. Taking out a single flower from the bouquet she was carrying, she offered it to him in an exaggerated gesture. It was the product of years of selective breeding, despite many doubts to whether it was possible—a modern rose with pale-blue petals.

“Take this as thanks. Good luck with your date.”

“I'm telling you, it's not a date.”

But the woman wasn't listening. She shoved the rose into his hand and sauntered off like a spring breeze, leaving a perplexed Shin in her wake.

As Shin expected, when he showed up to their meeting spot, Rita greeted him with a strange expression.

“What’s this? Who put this idea into your head?” She looked down at the blue rose in Shin’s hand, which he held on to for lack of a better thing to do with it.

“I just, um, I got it as a gift... You want it?” Shin said, offering it to her.

Rita looked at him with a slightly fed up expression.

“You know, Shin... You’re not supposed to give a girl something you got from another woman.”

“...”

Shin wondered how she knew about that detail. But Rita thought she could smell the scent of a woman’s perfume on him—and it wasn’t the kind of perfume his mother wore. And it clearly wasn’t the smell of the blue rose, which was a strain that gave off a very faint aroma. No, it was the clear scent of daffodils.

Well...

She knew Shin well enough to know that for all his curt facades, he was quite softhearted. He’d probably picked up something they dropped, and they’d given him this flower as a reward. And so she eventually accepted the rose he held up somewhat helplessly in front of her.

“Still, I’ll take it... It is pretty, after all.”

Shin himself likely cared little for flowers, but if he figured Rita might want it and brought it all the way here for her, that did make her a little bit happy.

Handing him a birthday present was only half the reason she had Shin hang out with her that day. The other half was because there was this expensive café she wanted to visit, but it was too expensive on its own. It did have a discount for couples, though.

And besides, she didn’t feel comfortable handing Shin the birthday present at home. After all, her father was becoming fussy about his teenage daughter, and Rei was, despite being their elder, enjoying teasing them a little too much.

“Mm, it’s good.”

“The cream and the fruit inside it taste natural... But apparently, the synthesized foodstuffs they make in the factories are getting good enough that they almost taste like real luxury items.”

Rita was happily eating a cake with (synthesized) mango sauce—mangoes only grew in the continent’s south, making them unobtainable due to the war—and synthesized cream. Shin was eating the same thing opposite her when he gave this curt impression, which made her drop her shoulders.

“Shin, don’t say stuff like that when I’m eating something tasty.”

“Why not? I’m complimenting them,” Shin said dubiously.

Rita looked away from him exasperated, and her eyes met with the middle-aged man at the adjacent table. He was sipping elegantly on a cup of coffee. His face had a scar on it, and he looked to be some kind of high-ranking military officer on his break. He smiled at her softly.

Collapsible tables were set up over the flagstones of the café’s terrace. Dotting the ivory streets were parasols that were currently folded up, looking like flower buds growing against the blue sky. The citizens moved like butterflies resting in the shadow of these flowers.

The middle-aged Celena soldier sipped his coffee alone. A Celena and Heliodor boy and an Alabaster girl sat at a table, their notebooks open. An Aventura and Sapphira couple sat at another. A group of Meridiana boys and girls, seemingly siblings, all gathered in one place. An Adularia waitress and a Pyrope waiter walked among the tables.

“...Say, Shin.”

Turning her gaze back to him, *Annette* asked:

“Say...would this sort of world have been better?”

Suddenly, everyone around them had disappeared. The countless, unoccupied tables threw pale shadows on what was not cobblestone but a plane, sitting beneath a sky covered in milk-colored mist. The shadows were almost unnaturally distinct, each of them cast in different directions according to the light.

Before she even realized it, Annette found herself clad in a white coat and a Prussian blue uniform. The contrast between them made her wistful for some reason.

“Well...this world would have been nice, I think.”

Shin replied, clad in a desert camouflage field uniform, which seemed to alternate like light shining in the water, flashing in random between that uniform, a steel-colored Federacy uniform, and a flight suit. She could see a few faint scars—and one large mark on his neck that looked like a decapitation scar. She didn’t know where he got that one.

“It would have been good if no one took from us. If we didn’t lose anything. If we never had to get hurt. If this was a world where everyone was a bit kinder to one another, I wouldn’t have had to become a Reaper.”

He never would have had to learn how to pilot a Feldreß. Or learn how to shoot a pistol or an assault rifle. He wouldn’t have needed to teach himself how to cut off his emotions or silence his heart. He could have kept his talent for combat, which he’d never wished for, asleep for the rest of his life.

And most importantly, none of the comrades who’d fought with him would have had to die in the Eighty-Sixth Sector without a future to live for or a grave to rest in. Their sole memory wouldn’t have been those aluminum grave markers and Shin’s all too modest promise to carry their memories with him until he met his end.

However... Even still...

“There would’ve been people I would have never gotten to meet in this world. Sights and words I’d never experience. So I can’t say this world is better...”

Smiling, as if concluding that this did seem like what Shin would say, Annette felt a tinge of loneliness fill her heart. There were no figures or voices around them. Even the shadows of the tables were beginning to fade, and she couldn’t see the expression of the boy sitting opposite her.

But she could tell, somehow, that he wore a faint smile. The weak smile of someone repressing pain and stifling tears.

“I can’t say that I’d have been better off if I wasn’t in that world.”

Annette smiled softly.

“...Right.”

“You’re right.”

That whisper was breathed into a room in the Rüstkammer base’s first barracks. Blinking a few times, Annette sat up in her bed. Her bed was a bit more luxurious than the one allotted to the Processors on the lower floors. It felt spacious even for Annette, who grew up as a noble daughter. That bed was occupying the large room of a field officer.

Needless to say, Shin wasn’t there. Taking advantage of the fact that she was alone, Annette smirked, her hair still unkempt.

Would this sort of world have been better? She couldn’t believe herself.

“When will I learn when to give up?”

It was a strange dream, Shin pondered as he looked up at the now-familiar ceiling of his room in Rüstkammer base. Rooms given to company officers—in other words, people like Shin—in this base were plain and had minimal furnishings. But this was a new base, and so everything was built firmly, the very image of sturdy quality.

Compared with the Eighty-Sixth Sector’s barracks—which was weather-beaten and rickety enough to care little for drafts and roof leaks and hardly sheltered them from the elements—this place looked almost luxurious.

So luxurious, in fact, that when he was first stationed here, Shin couldn’t quite get used to the place and felt uncomfortable. Looking back on it now, his heart still couldn’t leave the battlefield.

It still couldn’t leave the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

And yet he was getting used to looking at this ceiling. Getting used to this room. By now, he didn’t feel reluctant to wish for happiness, for the future he used to dread.

Yes, at some point, the battlefield of the Eighty-Sixth Sector had suddenly started feeling awfully distant to him. So to dream of an illusion of peaceful

days in the Republic, of memories that had long since faded...

In that world, none of his comrades would have had to die. Neither would his parents and brother. And that thought alone made his heart throb with pain.

“I don’t want to say that about this world... Not now.”

No longer could he say that the people in this world, and all his myriad encounters, would have been better off relegated to oblivion. He was now able to believe that he couldn’t carelessly turn his back on the world...no matter how cruel and unforgiving it might be.

AFTERWORD

Welcome back, one and all, to the hell of zero casualties!

Hello, everyone, this is Asato Asato, and this was the short story–collection volume. The central work this time was the story of Shin’s past, *Fragmental Neoteny*, which details his exploits in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. During its publication on Kakuyomu, *Fragmental Neoteny* was met with reviews full of screams of agony. Now the readers of the print volumes can join in on all the fun and the screaming!

In addition, we had *The Simple Days of Triage Black Tag*, which told of a certain day in the Spearhead squadron’s life from Kujo’s perspective; *The Banks of the Lethe*, the story of Shin’s group on their merry journey to the hereafter; and *Fido*, a story about the true identity of that cute friend of Shin’s! Do look forward to reading those.

Also, the manga versions of *Run Through the Battlefield* (illustrated by Hakuya Yamasaki, published in Manga UP!) and *Fragmental Neoteny* (illustrated by Takuya Shinjou, published in *Monthly Comic Alive*) have begun serialization. Please check them out!

Now, for some thanks.

To the editors in charge of me, Kiyose and Tsuchiya. You told me to write whatever I liked, and never once did you order me to stop. Thank you so much. To Shirabii, the art of twelve-year-old Shin on the cover was so adorable it made me feel terribly guilty for all the awful things I put him through in the story... To I-IV. If you didn’t upload that art of Fido dancing to Twitter, I wouldn’t have written the extra chapter where Shin names Fido!

To Yoshihara. The front-and back-cover illustrations for Volume 3, showing

the Nouzen siblings' contrast, was very heartrending. To Somemiya, Lena and the Eighty-Six's battles (be it the snowball fight, the exams, or New Year's) were very heartwarming. To Yamasaki, your depictions of both large armies clashing and the mental state of the characters shook my heart. To Shinjou. The way you render firing at point-blank range and each detail leading up to it is just too cool... To Director Ishii. Every episode of the anime is thirty minutes of flawlessness. Every week, I could utter amazed wows while watching your works.

And to you, who picked up this book. Thank you so, so much. Shin's seven-year battle with the Legion, which has been going on since he was eleven years old, will finally begin approaching its conclusion starting with the next volume.

In any case, I hope that for even a short moment, I could take you to the battlefield where one young child soldier transformed into the eastern front's Headless Reaper. To where that Headless Reaper and his comrades spent their days.

Music playing while writing this afterword:
"Ranse Eroica" by ALI PROJECT

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